

The Mutualities of Conscience:  
Satire, Community, and Individual Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern England

by

William F. Revere

Department of English  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
David Aers, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sarah Beckwith

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thomas Pfau

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Paul J. Griffiths

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English in the Graduate School  
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ABSTRACT

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of “conscience” in English literature, theology, and political theory from the late fourteenth century to the late seventeenth. In doing so it links up some prominent conceptual history of the term, from Aquinas to Hobbes, with its imaginative life in English narrative. In particular, beginning with William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* and moving through texts in the “*Piers Plowman* tradition” and on to John Bunyan’s allegories and polemics, I explore what I call the “satiric” dimensions of conscience in an allegorical tradition that spans a long and varied period of reform in England, medieval and early modern. As I argue, conscience in this tradition is linked up with the jolts of irony as with the solidarities of mutual recognition. Indeed, the ironies of conscience *depend* precisely on settled dispositions, shared practices, common moral sources and intellectual traditions, and relationships across time. As such, far from simply being a form of individualist self-assurance, conscience presupposes and advocates a social body, a vision of communal life. Accordingly, this study tracks continuities and transformations in the imagined communities in which the judgment that is conscience is articulated, and so too in the capacities of prominent medieval literary forms to go on speaking for others in the face of dramatic cultural upheaval.

After an introductory essay that examines the relationship between conscience, irony, and literary form, I set out in chapter one with a study of Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1388 in its final version), an ambitious, highly dialectical poem that gives a figure called Conscience a central role in its account of church and society in late medieval England. While Langland draws deeply on scholastic accounts of *conscientia*—an act of practical reason, as Aquinas says, that is binding as your best

judgment and yet vexing in its capacity for error and need for formation in the virtues—he dramatizes error in terms of imagined practice, pressing the limits of theory. A long, recursive meditation on how one’s socially embodied life constitutes distinctive forms of both blindness and vision, Langland’s poem searches out the forms of recognition and mutuality that he takes a truth-seeking irony of conscience to require in his contemporary moment. My reading sets the figure of Conscience in *Piers Plowman* alongside the figure of Holy Church to explore some of these themes, and so also to address why the beginning of Langland’s poem matters for its ending. In chapter two I turn to an anonymous early fifteenth-century poem of political complaint called *Mum and the Sothsegger* (ca. 1409) that was written in response to new legislation introducing capital punishment for heresy in England. In *Mum* I show how an early “*Piers Plowman* tradition” gets taken up into a rhetoric of royal counsel and so subtly, but decisively, revises aspects of Langland’s political and ecclesial vision. In a final chapter moving across several of John Bunyan’s works from the 1670s and 1680s, I show how Bunyan conceptualizes coercion in terms of the state *and* the market, and so defends a “liberty” of conscience that resists both Hobbesian assimilations of moral judgment to the legal structures of territorial sovereignty and an emergent market nominalism, in which exchange value trumps all moral reflection. In part two of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Bunyan draws surprisingly on medieval sources to display the forms of mutuality that he thinks are required to resist “consent” to such unjust forms of coercion.

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Writing a dissertation with the theme of mutuality at its center, I had better know that doing justice to what I have received from friends, colleagues, teachers, and family over the years is not the work of a few pages. It is, however, a joy at least to name some people who have had a hand in this project, whether they knew it or not. And since the audience I imagine for this dissertation, fit though few, is made up almost exclusively of people included in these acknowledgments (and no doubt only a persevering fraction of these), I can perhaps be a little longwinded in thanking them.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Conscience and the Social Bodies of Satire

In his recent Tanner Lectures at Harvard, published now as *A Case for Irony*, Jonathan Lear has sought to disentangle irony from what he argues are some prominent, diminishing construals of it.<sup>1</sup> For Lear, to think of irony or pursue it simply as some kind of critical detachment, aloofness, hermeneutic of suspicion, profound doubt about our “final vocabularies,” or ceaseless play and change of costume is not to do it justice. Irony, in Lear’s view, is a human excellence, a kind of fidelity, a species of truthfulness. It is “radically first-personal, present tense” (16). Rather than being a kind of reflective consciousness that “has no commitments” and is simply a “detached observer of commitment,” irony, Lear writes, is best understood as a “peculiar form of committed reflection” (21). “The point” about irony, Lear explains,

is not about leaving the social world behind, but about a peculiar way of living in relation to it. When irony hits the mark, the person who is its target has an uncanny experience that the demands of an ideal, value, or identity to which he takes himself to be already committed dramatically transcend the received social understandings. The experience is uncanny in the sense that what had been a familiar demand suddenly feels unfamiliar, calling one to an unfamiliar way of life; and yet the unfamiliarity also has a weird sense of familiarity; as though we can recognize that this is our commitment. (25)

For all their uses and insights, the social sciences, Lear argues, tend to be unironic. They

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2011). This text also contains exchanges around Lear’s lectures between Lear and Christine M. Korsgaard, Richard Moran, Cora Diamond, and Robert A. Paul. For a further exchange, which I draw on in particular in what follows, see Jonathan Lear and Alasdair MacIntyre, “Irony and Humanity: A Dialogue between Jonathan Lear and Alasdair MacIntyre,” available on the Harvard University Press web site (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/irony-and-humanity/>).

deal in the realm of “social pretense,” which in general they seek to collect data about that are measurable, repeatable, and statistically analyzable. But a genuinely ironic question for Lear puts the same term—say, *prayer*—in two different columns of meaning. On the left is what Lear calls the social pretense of prayer, i.e., that practice which “pretends” to be prayer not in the sense that it is playing make-believe, but insofar as it is putting itself forward as or claiming to be that generally recognized practice called prayer. In the right-hand column, by contrast, is an aspirational valence for the same word, *prayer*. This right-hand meaning takes work, time, and even commitment to get to know. Its meaning can sneak up on you, stop you short. The right-hand column of meaning requires a kind of inquiry the social sciences typically do not do. “So, for example,” Lear writes, “if one wanted to understand religion in America, one might try to establish reliable statistics for what percentage of the population attends church each week, what percentage self-describes as religious, and so on” (26). But “[t]here is no statistically reliable way to answer the ironic question, ‘Among the millions who pray on Sunday, does anyone pray?’”

Elaborating his account of irony elsewhere, Lear suggests that a genuine engagement with ironic questions like the one about prayer would seem to require and so to draw one more deeply into a temporally extended conversation in which such questions are seen as worth pursuing in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Sociologists of religion are not precluded from writing about prayer, but they should be chastened about the kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to Lear’s concluding remarks in Lear and MacIntyre, “Irony and Humanity”: “in thinking about Alasdair MacIntyre’s comments I realize irony can be used every bit as much to deepen and enrich a tradition as it can to disrupt and undo it. I discuss this very briefly at the end of the book . . . . But I have not thought nearly as much as I would like to about how irony might, on occasion, enliven our lives *within* a tradition.”

questions they can ask and hope to answer. In Lear's terms, the engagement irony presupposes not only invites but *requires* practice, along with attention to the history of such practice and the communities in which it has been embodied. While Lear is not exactly encouraging sociologists of religion to pray, he is certainly pressing us to ask in at least formal terms about the kinds of questions that simply cannot occur to us, or occur in the same way, apart from practice, commitment, mutual forms of recognition, patience, and change across time.

Readers of later medieval and early modern cultural history will recognize that the ironic question as Lear describes it was a recurrent and hotly contested feature of religious and political discourse in the long period of "reformations" in England that stretched out from the later Middle Ages through to the late seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> Not least among such questions in this period was Lear's specific one, the question about what counts as "prayer," which issued in contests over the criteria of prayer's public recognition and its personal efficacy as a practice of Christian worship. In this long period of varying discourses of reform, as we might say, a lot was at stake between the terms in Lear's column A and those in column B. The possibility of irony, Lear writes,

arises when a gap opens between pretense as it is made available in a social practice and an aspiration or ideal which, on the one hand, is embedded in pretense—indeed, which expresses what the pretense is all about—but which, on the other hand, seems to transcend the life and the social practice in which that pretense is made. The pretense seems at once to capture and miss the aspiration. (11)

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<sup>3</sup> For the pluralized term I use here applied in a sixteenth-century context see Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For a recent use of the term in critical relationship to some contemporary trends in the historiography of reform across medieval and early modern England, see David Aers and Nigel Smith, "English Reformations," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 40.3 (2010): 425-38.

Lear's language of a "gap" between pretense and aspiration has sometimes been echoed by historians in accounting for differences in approaches to reform across the later Middle Ages and early modern period. In his extremely wide-ranging recent account of the Protestant Reformation and its afterlife in the modern world, *The Unintended Reformation*, for example, Brad Gregory surveys the "chasm between ideals and realities" that "provided the wellspring for the recurrent waves of Christian reform between the eleventh and the early sixteenth centuries."<sup>4</sup> By and large, on Gregory's account, the crucial difference between medieval movements of reform and those that emerged in the sixteenth century and later, was a turn to doctrine.

The necessary indivisibility of the necessarily visible church (an extension of God's incarnation in Jesus and a parallel to human beings as embodied souls) explains why the medieval conflicts between secular and ecclesiastical authorities in Western Christendom were almost exclusively about jurisdiction, not about doctrines. Those who *did* reject the church's truth claims in the Middle Ages sometimes found political patrons, at least for a time . . . . But overwhelmingly, even when secular authorities' revulsion at sinfulness in the church matched that of zealous saints, they poured themselves into efforts of reform within the framework of its practices and the teachings those practices presupposed. They did not reject the church's truth claims, including its claim to be the visible, concrete instrument of God's salvation, which, until Jesus came again, alone made eternal life possible: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. (145)

As Gregory insists, intellectual questions about doctrine were also questions about forms of social life and their authority: questions about ecclesial polity and authority, but questions also, therefore, about various kinds of civil authority, forms of labor, economic

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<sup>4</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 140. Cf. 202, where Gregory refers to the "gap between Christian prescription and practice" in the later Middle Ages. At the present writing, Gregory's book has been reviewed extensively in a variety of venues and continues to receive such attention. For a particularly engaging set of scholarly reviews, with a three-part response from Gregory, see the forum devoted to the book at The Immanent Frame blog, available at <<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/the-unintended-reformation/>>.

practices, and educational institutions. At issue, too, of course, were hermeneutic questions about how doctrine was and was not to be discerned, taught, received, and criticized. In Gregory's view, the Reformation turn to doctrine, for both magisterial Protestants and radicals, was couched in a hermeneutics of *sola scriptura* that by definition was subject to no independent authority (like church tradition) and as such gave rise to disputes it could not possibly adjudicate. A common mind on matters of enormous importance could not be achieved, even with supplemental appeals to the Holy Spirit or reason. Among the upshots here, according to Gregory, was an undermining of "the importance of counsel that shaped one's formation in a moral community and the exercise of prudence within it—in the end one was one's own sovereign authority, answerable only to God" (215). Radical Protestants like Milton and Roger Williams defend individual "conscience" at the expense of "institutions, traditions, authorities, or the opinions of others." In doing so they simply expose an individualist logic already implicit for magisterial Protestants, but which had been hidden from view by the political protection and institutionalization those Protestants found across Europe. In Gregory's broader genealogy of various aspects of the modern western world, the alleged Reformation exaltation of the sovereignty of individual conscience is a crucial chapter in the history of our shared present. In it we can glimpse a range of later phenomena: modern forms of moral subjectivism and hyperpluralism, a disembedded and rapaciously autonomous economy, the displacement of a substantive ethic of common goods for a procedural ethic of rights, the emergence of the modern (market-) state, and the invention of a truncated "religious" life formed far more deeply by the liturgies of state and market than the intrinsic resources of theological traditions and their corresponding practices.

If we approach Gregory's thesis in Lear's terms, one way to read his story about the Reformation and modernity is as a sort of fracture in the gaze of Christian irony, a proliferating series of turns away from the (always potentially ironic) vision that inhered in practices within what Gregory calls a shared framework or "institutionalized worldview," to a set of rival views preoccupied with doctrine and premised not on catholic commonality but confessional difference. These views were likewise "institutionalized," but increasingly, Gregory argues, in mutually alienating ways, as either intimately enmeshed in rival forms of territorial sovereignty and the disciplinary regimes of the early modern state, or in a proliferating range of dissenting communities. Here, ultimately, was a cross-confessional displacement of the virtue ethics that had been definitive of the medieval church's moral teaching: early modern regimes wanted "obedience to laws" and "behavioral compliance" more than virtue, which was less predictable (161). Framing the "gap" or "chasm," then, between pretense and aspiration in medieval movements of reform, as Gregory would have it, was what he describes as a deeply resourceful communal "worldview" and its institutional forms. Adapting Lear's terms to Gregory's thesis, we can say that a rich reformist irony did and might well have continued to presuppose and emerge out of this shared worldview, rather than have been articulated in explicit and increasingly splintered antagonism to it.

While my forms of attention to texts and authors in this study differ markedly from Gregory's in *The Unintended Reformation*, I share with him and with a range of contemporary cultural histories written on an impressively grand scale a concern to track



change and continuity across periods conventionally kept distinct as “medieval” and “Renaissance” or “early modern.”<sup>5</sup> With Gregory, again, I am especially concerned to explore the fate of common moral goods across this period, shared moral sources that could not be easily subordinated or assimilated to individual “interest,” but rather, in whose light the articulation of individual flourishing was alone most fully possible. Where Gregory sees a decisive break, however, in the emergence in the Reformation of allegedly individualist forms of “conscience”—apparently as some sort of deep logic or grammar to Protestant arguments, masked by confessional ensconcement in magisterial regimes but exposed and championed by dissenters and radicals—I linger to ask what forms of mutuality some reformist accounts of conscience—medieval and early modern, Catholic and self-consciously Protestant—*themselves claim* as constitutive. This focus allows for the recognition of social and intellectual continuities that might not otherwise be apparent, even as it also sees how a rearticulation of apparently shared ideas in very different contexts must register the practical force of meaning in historical *use*. As the etymology of *conscientia* itself suggests, and as I shall detail more fully in the chapters that follow, conscience had long been regarded as a form of a “knowing-with.” I am

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<sup>5</sup> For a reflection on Gregory’s modes of analysis in *Unintended* that attends to its lack of “patient hermeneutic engagement” with major texts and voices, see Thomas Pfau, “History without Hermeneutics: Brad Gregory’s *Unintended Modernity*,” at The Immanent Frame blog, <<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/11/06/history-without-hermeneutics-brad-gregorys-unintended-modernity/>>. For Gregory’s response, see his “Genre, Method, and Assumptions,” at <<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2014/01/21/genre-method-and-assumptions/>>. Gregory’s disavowal of the need for what he calls “close, commentarial readings” to make his case, in favor of identifying a “historical process” that would in principle encompass such readings (apparently without needing to make them), is perhaps plausible enough in the limited terms of Gregory’s acknowledgement that he could not do everything without “distending” his analysis indefinitely, but this disavowal of “commentary” and “exegesis” as subordinate to “historical process” still does not seem to me to address adequately Pfau’s comments about the character of historical agency and its hermeneutic dimensions.

concerned to ask what forms of “knowing-with” a select range of articulations of conscience imagine and advocate.

In what follows, accordingly, I pair the question of “conscience” with explorations in the politics and ethics of literary form. In the writers I study here, self-referencing individual conviction is not the wellspring of the moral and political imagination. Moving from William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* in the late fourteenth century, to a political allegory self-consciously invoking Langland’s poem in the early fifteenth century, and finally to John Bunyan’s allegories and polemics in the late seventeenth, I explore the contested and complex public import of a medieval English tradition of allegorical writing as well as the attempted reappropriation of this form in a very different seventeenth-century context. I treat the “satiric” dimensions of this allegorical tradition in a fairly capacious sense, as involving formal and rhetorical modes that attempt to recall, reenvision, and critically apply the perceived moral sources of common life. To adapt Sheldon Wolin’s description in his *Politics and Vision* of the imaginative work of political philosophy, satire “epitomizes a society” and presents social life in its “corrected fullness,” so as to help us see things that are not otherwise apparent about our basic presuppositions, practices, institutions, and ideals.<sup>6</sup> Again, following Lear, if the ironies of allegorical satire from Langland to Bunyan are in their different ways “peculiar forms of committed reflection,” not about knowing “detachment” or “leaving the social world behind” but a way of bringing common life more sharply into focus, I explore in this study how the social bodies that satire

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<sup>6</sup> See Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edition (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), ch. 1.

presupposes change for these writers, and what difference such changes make for the intrinsic aspirations of their chosen form to speak for others. Across a long period of “English reformations,” I ask, how does satire imagine community?<sup>7</sup>

Taking a lead from what I see as both a conceptual and a historical disjuncture between Augustinian forms of alterity for moral judgment and what I track in chapter three as Erastian and Hobbesian skepticism about it, this study explores the imaginative life of conscience across a long period in English narrative. Early modern intellectual historians have suggested that in the welter of debates around “toleration” in the later seventeenth century, conscience was conceived with a diminished reference to *will*: belief was theorized as involuntary, and so what counted in political terms for conscience and its recognition were intention and sincerity. An older, Augustinian and Thomist view had regarded will (and its temporal and bodily dimensions in habit) as intertwined in complex ways with moral judgment, so that to invoke “conscience”—which, as Aquinas insisted, was indeed “binding,” right or wrong—was more to begin moral and political inquiry than bring it to a halt. Meanwhile, however, as Mark Goldie has shown, the Restoration case for coercion in the English church in the later seventeenth century was made with ubiquitous reference to Augustine’s late antique advocacy of coercion against the Donatists, a case that depended precisely on the voluntary dimensions of belief and so its potential for correction. Restoration divines, Goldie argues, likewise drew deeply on

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<sup>7</sup> In formulating this animating question I have found helpful Debora Shuger’s approach in “‘Society Supernatural’: The Imagined Community of Hooker’s *Laws*,” in A. S. McGrade, ed., *Richard Hooker and the Construction of Christian Community* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1997), 307-31. Shuger’s title of course alludes to Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983, rev. 1991).

Aquinas's moral and political theology here, but with less explicit if any reference to him so as to "avoid citing Papist sources."<sup>8</sup> Yet "Augustinianism," medieval or modern, notoriously takes many shapes and pursues any number of strands from Augustine's extraordinarily capacious and diverse corpus—strands which Augustine himself may not have reconciled.<sup>9</sup> What I explore here as a tradition of thinking about conscience through Augustine and Aquinas among others, and on to Langland and finally to Bunyan, is a narrative tradition, one whose resources were such as, in the case of Bunyan, to resist and sharply to criticize precisely the early modern "Augustinianism" Goldie has documented. Bunyan does so, however, in terms that likewise do not square with what Gregory sees as a Reformation individualism that simply displaced earlier forms of counsel, prudence, and mutuality. With Langland, on my reading here, Bunyan's satiric allegory was premised on mutuality, on teachers and trustworthy guides, and his was a form of writing that likewise aspired to speak justly for others. Of course, there is an important and complex set of transformations between Langland's Holy Church and Bunyan's little ecclesia of "three or four" Bedford women, teachers and companions given imaginative life, as I read them, in Bunyan's figures of Christiana and Mercy. But the more interesting story about "conscience" as I read it here is neither its "rise" and recognition in liberal societies, nor its tragically new one-dimensionality in the Reformation, but the

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Goldie, "The Theory of Religious Intolerance in Restoration England," in Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel, and Nicholas Tyacke, eds., *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution in England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 331-68, here at 346. On the variety of dissenting articulations of conscience in the Restoration, see too Gary S. De Krey, "Rethinking the Restoration: Dissenting Cases for Conscience," *The Historical Journal* 38.1 (1995): 53-83.

<sup>9</sup> For a treatment of Augustine and his highly varied late medieval reception, see David Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009). On Augustine and coercion, see especially 20-24.

specific and varied social bodies, communities of commitment, that gave it form, content, and an imaginative life.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Sovereignty of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*

William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is a long English poem of extraordinary intellectual passion and scope. Apparently written and rewritten over a period of more than twenty years, including the last years of its author's life, *Piers* bears the marks of a searching, courageous authorial intelligence, as well as an expansive social and theological vision. In the course of its twenty-two books (in its longest form, what scholars have designated the C-text), called "passus" or steps, the poem employs a wide range of genres, styles, and tonal registers, complicating and qualifying its relationship to each.<sup>1</sup> Step by step, *passus* by *passus*, *Piers* forges ahead with what can only be described as a dialectical urgency, even as it insistently prompts its readers in a variety of ways to remember and reenvision where it has been.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is not too much to say that loss of memory is one of the poem's most abiding and explicit concerns. What it is to "see" rightly in this visionary work involves a host of interrelated temporalities: narrative, historical-topical,

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<sup>1</sup> *Piers Plowman* exists in three versions; this chapter focuses on the last of these, usually dated to sometime shortly after 1388, the C-text. Quotations are taken from Derek Pearsall's edition, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008). On the poem's range of styles and genres, see Elizabeth Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); and Morton W. Bloomfield, "*Piers Plowman*" as a *Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961), ch. 1. For an influential account of the poem's narrative forms in terms of its "surrealist" treatment of space, see Charles Muscatine, "Locus of Action in Medieval Narrative," *Romance Philology* 17.1 (1963): 115-22. On the poem's narrative forms, see too Anne Middleton's seminal essay, "Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*," in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 91-122.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the poem's dialectical movement, see David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), ch. 5.

liturgical, typological, and eschatological.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, *Piers Plowman* proves highly resistant to certain kinds of reading, both ahistorical theologizing and literary formalisms that would isolate the poem from the kinds of temporal situation it demands, within and beyond itself.

The particular light in which *Piers* itself casts the past, present, and future has long been a subject of intense interest for its readers. Surveying the kind of company *Piers* kept in early manuscript collections, Anne Middleton has surmised that *Piers*'s first audience regarded it "as a compendiously didactic work, whose literary mode is narrative or historical."<sup>4</sup> The poem, Middleton comments,

makes particularly heavy demands on its readers' ethical reflection upon, and engagement with, contemporary communal life, on what one may call their practical historical imaginations. For the "fit audience" of *Piers*, penetrating to historical precedents and foundations of both temporal and spiritual imperatives is a habitual way of thinking, a means of resolution, and a source of deeply invested emotion; and it is a capacity which gets a good deal of exercise in the poem.

By the sixteenth century, the practical historical imaginations of *Piers*'s readers were no less exercised. Some of *Piers*'s most prominent early modern admirers glimpsed in the poem a history of their present. The English Protestant antiquary John Bale saw in *Piers* a strikingly precocious vision of reform, a fourteenth-century poet's unflinching diagnosis of his own times as well as a keen prefigurement of things to come. "In this

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<sup>3</sup> The poem's engagement with history has often been explored by way of its eschatology. For an influential account of the poem as an "apocalypse," see Bloomfield, "*Piers Plowman*" as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse. For a divergent account of Langland's Christocentric eschatology that resists assimilating his poem to the historical schematics of Joachim of Fiore, see David Aers, "Visionary Eschatology: *Piers Plowman*," *Modern Theology* 16.1 (2000): 3-17.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Middleton, "The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*," in *Middle English Poetry and Its Literary Background*, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), 101-23, at 109.

erudite work,” Bale wrote, “beside the various and delightful allegories, [Langland] prophecied many things, which we have seen come to pass in our own days.”<sup>5</sup> The radical poet and printer Robert Crowley took a more complicated view of *Piers*’s “prophetic” status, but he likewise looked to *Piers* as an exemplar of courageous Christian vision in continuity with contemporary projects and developments. With an eye toward generating a suitably reformist literature, Crowley produced three printed editions of *Piers Plowman* in 1550, each accompanied by an editorial Preface and an increasingly extensive body of textual annotation. Crowley’s editorial work recruited *Piers* into contemporary Protestant polemics, while his poetry sought, correspondingly, to evoke *Piers* at various points in its language, form, politics, and theology.<sup>6</sup>

For contemporary critics committed to read across the disciplinary and periodic divisions of “medieval” and “early modern” cultural history, *Piers Plowman* remains a rich and indispensable text (or set of texts). In his volume in the new *Oxford English Literary History*, covering a period of 1350-1547, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, James Simpson has revived Bale’s account of *Piers* as a “prophetic” poem, while casting

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<sup>5</sup> Bale, *Scriptorum illustrium maioris brytannie, quam nunc angliam et scotiam uocant, catalogus*, 474; qtd. in Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 332.

<sup>6</sup> For a brief survey account of *Piers*’s readership from its apparent use by the rebels in the English rising of 1381 into the early modern period, see Anne Hudson, “Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*,” in *A Companion to “Piers Plowman”*, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 251-66. On the poem’s early modern history of reception see also Barbara A. Johnson, *Reading “Piers Plowman” and “The Pilgrim’s Progress”*: *Reception and the Protestant Reader* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992); and Sarah A. Kelen, *Langland’s Early Modern Identities* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007). On Crowley, see John N. King, “Robert Crowley’s editions of ‘Piers plowman’: A Tudor Apocalypse,” *Modern Philology* 73.4, pt. 1 (1976): 342-52; and King, “Robert Crowley: A Tudor Gospelling Poet,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 8 (1978): 220-37. For a discussion of Crowley’s views of *Piers* as “prophetic” in relation to Bale’s, one which qualifies some of King’s assertions on this point, see John M. Bowers, “*Piers Plowman* and the Police: Notes toward a History of the Wycliffite Langland,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1992): 1-50; and Kelen, ch. 1.



this term in a historiographical light virtually opposite to Bale's. *Piers* "prophesied the future," Simpson remarks, while "that very future attempted to reinvok[e] the poem." Yet despite the recuperative efforts of Langland's early Protestant advocates, their theology and politics rendered *Piers* effectively "irretrievable."<sup>7</sup> Prophetic Langland might have been, but unlike Bale, he was himself hardly triumphalist about the future he imagined. Rather, while "Langland does indeed 'foresee' the Reformation," he "equally recoils from, and attempts to forestall, it" (345).

For Simpson, the ending of *Piers* poignantly distills Langland's prophetic vision as well as the limits of his poetic project. In the poem's final lines, we witness Conscience — a notably longsuffering figure in a poem in which virtually all such figures briskly come and eventually go — vow ("By Crist") to make a pilgrimage in search of Piers the plowman (XXII.380-86). Conscience has been given a prominent role in the leadership of Holy Church by the Holy Spirit, a role that becomes central in the effective absence of Piers, who is now "to the plough" tilling truth in the "wyde . . . world" (XXI.256-61; XXI.335, 333). Piers has become a figure of St. Peter to whom the risen Christ has entrusted his pardon (XXI.183-90). While Conscience presides over the eucharistic meal, "bred yblessed and godes body therunder," it is to Piers that penitential "payment" is due, payment that would apparently reinscribe Piers's presence in Christian community and in Langland's poem (XXI.383-90). But that pardon and participation in this meal require practical acknowledgment of one's sin: restitution of ill-gotten gains and mutual forgiveness. These conditions have seemed too burdensome, and

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<sup>7</sup> Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History, Volume 2, 1350-1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 344 (further pagination cited in the text).

Conscience's offer of this health-giving meal has been roundly rejected. The poem here depicts a Church besieged from within by the forces of Antichrist. We witness a turn to the friars in response, a group that has offered penance in more amenable terms, ones which have proven decisively "enchanted" (XXII.378). So now Conscience vows to become a pilgrim in search of Piers, the Church's true if elusive authority, and a solution to the Church's problem of the friars, who "for nede flateren" (XXII.383). This pilgrim Conscience cries out after Grace (or the Holy Spirit) till Wille, the poet and narrator, awakes. With this final scene in view, Simpson writes:

Even if this climactic and enigmatic passage may seem triumphally to herald a new form of unmediated, lay spirituality, I want nevertheless to argue that for Langland this is a moment of terrible despair, and an admission of at least provisional defeat for the ambitious project of his poem. . . . The Church's failure to dispense penance provokes Conscience's pilgrimage into the wide world outside the Church, and leaves nothing between him and God but grace alone. (347)

This scene, like others in *Piers*, represents a "leave-taking" that amounts to a "rejection of institutional mediation, a faithful throwing of the self onto God's mercy, and a corresponding reliance on grace" (348). But again, on Simpson's reading, Langland has everywhere striven to surmount such leave-takings and now beholds Conscience's with "terrible despair." As Simpson has made this point elsewhere, the leave-taking of Conscience "would seem to prophesy, 150 years ahead of time, without enthusiasm, the isolated Conscience of Reformation spirituality."<sup>8</sup> Langland seems to overhear what has been recorded as Luther's final answer at Worms in 1521, and to recoil in horror, lament,

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<sup>8</sup> "*Piers Plowman*": *An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 213.

and prayerful protest.<sup>9</sup>

What accounts for *Piers*'s peculiarly powerful vision? On Simpson's reading, what Langland's poem is capable of seeing, what Conscience can figure and prefigure, has everything to do with this poet's "conception of the Church" (372). *Piers*'s ecclesial commitments make possible its historical imagination. And so too, Simpson argues, does the Church give Langland a poetics. In this respect Langland's "profound and daring commitment to fiction" can be distinguished from the role found for the fictive in "theologically dissident material" across the long period of Simpson's study (342). Unlike Langland, Simpson insists, both his near contemporaries, the Lollards, and so many sixteenth-century Protestants alike found little room for the resources fiction affords: among these, ambiguous and speculative imaginative expression, playful utterance, impersonation and exploratory dialogue, or irony.<sup>10</sup>

Simpson's reading of *Piers Plowman* displays a scope suitably ambitious for an astonishingly ambitious poem. For Simpson *Piers* comes to represent not so much an

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<sup>9</sup> "Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scriptures or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or of councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us." See *Luther's Final Answer*, in Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds. *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 212-14 (here at 214).

<sup>10</sup> On this question of the value attributed to fiction in "theologically dissident" writing across this period, including *Piers*, Simpson further points to the effects of a contemporaneous institutional and legal history of censorship. This is a history, he argues, in which the suppression of fiction, impersonation, and irony grew increasingly severe, especially from the early fifteenth century forward. But Simpson also finds reasons more clearly *internal* to the convictions of these writers for the differences he points to; it is these "internal" reasons in *Piers* I take up here. I do not, however, attempt to deal with Simpson's characterization of Lollard or sixteenth-century evangelical poetics. See *Reform and Cultural Revolution* 333-43; and for *Piers*'s strategies in this context, see also Simpson's essay, "The Constraints of Satire in 'Piers Plowman' and 'Mum and the Sothsegger,'" in *Langland, the Mystics, and the Medieval English Religious Tradition: Essays in Honour of S. S. Hussey*, ed. Helen Phillips (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 11-30.

idealized medieval past or a morning star of the Reformation, as a kind of counter-modernity.<sup>11</sup> And yet there is a peculiarity to Simpson's account of the Church in *Piers*, one which extends across his rendering of the poem's theology, politics, and poetics. For while Simpson admirably links up Langland's vision of the Church to his imaginative capacities more generally, he treats the figure Langland himself calls Holy Church as an "authoritarian" foil who, as Wille's first teacher, poses a *threat* to all fictional ways forward for the poem. Langland must "pretend trust" in this figure if his reformist satire is to proceed, but then must likewise find a way to expose Holy Church's own unwarranted ideological pretensions as a pretext for justifying his poetic labor.<sup>12</sup> How, after all, can a poem possibly go on in the wake of a teacher who descends from heaven and, in no uncertain terms, gives you all the answers?

In this chapter I revisit Wille's early exchange with Holy Church. In doing so I provide grounds for a rereading, as well, of Langland's figure Conscience, especially as he takes on a climactic role in the poem's final two passus. I ask what resources for fiction Holy Church's teaching on "treuthe" enables (rather than forecloses on), and what sort of intellectual agency she makes possible for Wille (rather than antagonizes or suppresses). I find that Langland displays no interest whatsoever in pursuing a poetics

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<sup>11</sup> As Simpson writes, Langland recoils from a centralizing Reformation he sees on the horizon, which "etiolates the Church to the profit of the State," and offers one of his own instead "in which grace is distributed in a wholly decentralized way" (*Reform and Cultural Revolution* 329). For an account of Simpson's thesis that questions the historical peculiarity of the early modern centralizations Simpson tracks, and which sets this thesis alongside recent "revisionist" historiography of the English Reformation, see David Aers and Nigel Smith, "English Reformations," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 40.3 (2010): 425-38; for Simpson's appeal to this revisionist historiography, see *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 327-29.

<sup>12</sup> For Simpson's use of this phrase to describe the poem's satiric strategies, see his *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 227, n. 32; and cf. *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 357-58.

grounded in a pretense of trust. In my view, Simpson's reading of the poem's satiric strategies runs the risk of duplicating and making epistemologically and ethically foundational precisely the kind of "leave-taking" he otherwise wants to see the poem resisting. The "isolated Conscience" Simpson sees in the poem's ending, depending tragically on "grace alone" apart from all forms of determinate human community, is but a correlate to his construal of Langland's satiric strategies throughout the poem. Where Langland begins on this score is, accordingly, as important a question as where he ends. In his exchange with Holy Church, on the reading I offer here, Wille is asked what he is capable of seeing in the "fair feld ful of folk," as in himself. This is a generative moment of both wonder and estrangement, an indispensable question about the kinds of dependence and acknowledgment, as well as the particular forms of renunciation, that enable vision. Pretense, fiction, is derivative of "treuthe," not the other way around. In this way, Holy Church recalls Wille, poet and narrator, to a life he did not invent, a history that extends beyond the narrative time of the poem itself. Simpson has certainly not been alone among Langland's readers in puzzling over just how the poem proceeds in relation to Holy Church's teaching. It is a striking fact of Langland's poem that Holy Church disappears as a speaking figure after Passus II. It is Conscience, in turn, who prominently leads and teaches a pentecostally empowered and then beleaguered Church by the poem's end. And yet Langland's poem represents "conscience" as a word itself put on Wille's lips by the same Holy Church who makes him a "fre man" at his baptism (I.73). That Wille should attend carefully to conscience is precisely the final injunction Holy Church utters before she disappears as a speaking figure in the poem: "'For Y bykenne the Crist,' quod she, 'and his clene moder, / And acombre thow neuere thy

consience for coueityse of mede” (II.53-4). It is, one might say, Holy Church who initiates Wille into the grammar of the *forum conscientiae*, Holy Church who begins to teach him the form of confession.<sup>13</sup> It is likewise in Holy Church’s teaching that Wille discovers conscience as a principle of resistance.

Yet Langland also shows that Holy Church, even on her own terms, requires more resources for self-articulation than she as a single teacher can possibly encompass. While hardly neglecting pressing questions to be addressed in Wille’s first-person agency, Langland moves far beyond these concerns (and so more fully addresses them) in making the voice(s) of Holy Church an explicit subject of imaginative representation and an object of his inquiry. The poem’s project of pursuing such resources through but beyond this authoritative voice is hinted at and prepared for in what should amount to noteworthy silences in her instruction. To cite those I take up here: Holy Church teaches incarnation but no resurrection, passion but no Pentecost. This is a teacher who tells Wille a good deal about where he comes from but only provides hints and guesses as to where she does. As we come to see, however, these teachings do emerge in particularly dramatic form in the poem’s final two passus, where they are given to Conscience. Appropriately enough for a telling of the Pentecost story, Conscience here gets taken up into his own account as an actor and not simply a narrator. He becomes the story he sets out to tell.

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<sup>13</sup> On the literature, procedures, and personnel relating to the “internal forum” of conscience and penance in the medieval Church in the wake of Lateran IV, see Joseph Goering, “The Internal Forum and the Literature of Penance and Confession,” *Traditio* 59 (2004): 175-227. For an outstanding treatment of the genre of the “form of confession,” a genre intended for lay use, and its “first-person scripting” of confessional voice, see Michael E. Cornett, “The Form of Confession: A Later Medieval Genre for Examining Conscience” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011). Cornett stresses the individuating aspects of this genre in a nonetheless communal context, in which my confession is spoken to and with the Church. One sees oneself as in a mirror and is strongly discouraged from mentioning in confession any sins other than one’s own. See, e.g., 46, 69-70.

In Holy Church, as I will argue in what follows, Langland's poem begins its wide-ranging inquiry into ecclesial and political legitimacy, which stretches out and ramifies in surprising and sometimes deeply troubling ways through to the poem's end. In this inquiry Holy Church's is not, however, an authoritarian voice from which the poem simply prescinds. Conscience, in dialogue with Wille before he is swept up in the drama of Wille's vision, becomes an imperfect agent in pursuit of a polity, a community of virtue: "Vnite, Holy Chirche an Englisch" (XXI.328). He does so guided by resources he has been given, not ones he has generated by strategies of satiric suspicion. As Simpson has eloquently maintained, Langland's vision of Conscience is hardly a dramatic heralding of an introspective and individualistic purity, a self-satisfied assertion of personal conviction. Yet he is also not simply a figure of defeated solitude, under the sign of prophetic tragedy. Rather, Langland's pilgrim Conscience is a witness, however beleaguered, for a pilgrim Church. How Langland envisions this pilgrim Church and what relationship it bears to the Church Langland knew are questions I wish to pursue in what follows.

### **Contingency, Irony, and the Poetics of Church: Holy Church on Vision**

As contemporary readers of *Piers Plowman* have insisted, Langland's task as a visionary poet, one who would say as he "sees," involves a careful negotiation of particular configurations of social power.<sup>14</sup> Here, surely, is a generic problem for truth-telling

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<sup>14</sup> For a treatment of particular configurations of power in late medieval England and their relation to contested versions of sanctity and gender, see David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); on the authors' "inductive procedure" for addressing questions of power, see 7-9, and for *Piers Plowman*, see ch. 2. An agenda-setting exploration of subjectivity in *Piers Plowman* in the context of a range of powerful

satire, but also a very particular one for Langland writing in the last decades of the fourteenth century in England. Jesus himself, as Conscience maintains, knew “sleythes” and “wyles” of a sort, when to stand his ground in public dispute and when to hide himself, when to speak and when to remain silent (XXI.96-105). In Passus XII, in an exchange with a figure called Leaute (“loyalty” or “lawfulness”), Wille cites biblical support in affirming that it is “no synne” for “trewe” men to “segge as they seen,” to say as they see (XII.28-29). Leaute gives Wille further criteria for licit public rebuke, but Wille finds little here or elsewhere in the way of soaring assurances like Cacciaguida’s to Dante that his words are necessary medicine in troubled times and call for no sweetening or dilution.

Conscience dark with its own or another’s shame will indeed feel thy words to be harsh; but none the less put away every falsehood and make plain all thy vision, — and then let them scratch where is the itch. For if thy voice is grievous at first taste, it will afterwards leave vital nourishment when it is digested. This cry of thine shall do as does the wind, which strikes most on the highest summits; and that is no small ground of honour.<sup>15</sup>

Still, in forging an ambitious poetics that sought virtually to address the gamut of contemporary discourses and institutions, Langland could draw on a range of resources.

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contemporary discourses may be found in David Lawton, “The Subject of *Piers Plowman*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 1 (1987): 1-30. On the form of the poem and its depiction of competing forms of knowledge and authority, see also Anne Middleton, “Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*.” James Simpson’s introductory account of the poem attends to its relationship to powerful discourses by arguing that “Langland is essentially concerned to transform institutions, and as such he often adopts the textual (or oral) forms of those institutions” so as to question their claims to authority. See “*Piers Plowman*”: *An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., here at 14. Much recent work has also been done along these lines regarding the poem’s relationship to those views that came to be identified with Lollardy; in this discussion Pamela Gradon’s study remains a crucial entry point: “Langland and the Ideology of Dissent,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 66 (1980): 179-205.

<sup>15</sup> Dante, *Paradiso* XVII.124-35, in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, III, Paradiso*, trans. Sinclair (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).



He could look, for example, to longstanding literary traditions of satire, political complaint, and advice to princes.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps still more attractive for this poet were his Church's own authoritative traditions of fraternal correction, which sought to guide the rebuke of sin toward the ends of justice, spiritual renewal, and reconciliation.<sup>17</sup> As James Simpson has argued, Langland may be seen to have faced a twofold set of "constraints" in attempting to write a Christian poetry of satire.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand were contemporary forms of censorship, which amounted to very material constraints on the kind of critical expression Langland might pursue. In the face of such constraints, like the poet who wrote *Mum and the Sothsegger* (*Mum and the Truthteller*) some years later in a notably different legislative context, Langland, Simpson argues, sought to devise rhetorical strategies for "saying as he saw" while also dissociating his own authorial point of view from potentially incendiary aspects of his poem's critical vision. On the other hand, however, Simpson points to "constraints" that were *internal* to Langland's own practice as a Christian satirist, discursive terms not simply imposed from without. In this respect, Langland's "problematic for satire is not simply . . . whether or not it is legal to judge, or

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<sup>16</sup> For a survey of traditions of satire to which Langland could appeal, see John A. Yunck, "Satire," in *A Companion to "Piers Plowman"*, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 135-54; and also Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). For later medieval English traditions of political complaint, see Janet Coleman, *Medieval Writers and Readers, 1350-1400* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). On the literature of counsel to princes, see, for example, Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). And on the variety of genres *Piers Plowman* draws on in constituting itself as an "apocalypse," see Morton W. Bloomfield, "*Piers Plowman*" as a *Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, ch. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Here see Edwin D. Craun, *Ethics and Power in Medieval English Reformist Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); for *Piers Plowman*, ch. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Simpson, "Constraints of Satire"; this argument is also developed at greater length in Simpson's *"Piers Plowman": An Introduction*.

‘*licitum*,’ as Lewtee says; instead, [Langland] implicates his *own* practice of satire in his moral and intellectual biography.” If he cannot exempt himself from his own satiric gaze, Langland as a serious truth-teller must face his own “need for forgiveness”: “If God is prepared to be merciful despite the fact that no one is worthy (*Nemo bonus*), then the satirist concerned with the theological implications of his satire must consider his own readiness to judge.”<sup>19</sup>

In this section I reflect further on what Simpson calls the “readiness to judge” as explored in *Piers Plowman*, by way of a reading of Wille’s early exchange with Holy Church. Narrative and thematic movement in Langland’s poem can be tracked along various lines, but one of these is surely the appearance and reappearance of the “fair feld ful of folk” that Wille first espies in the Prologue and receives instruction about from Holy Church in Passus I and II. In view of this field and its inhabitants, Holy Church begins with a question: “Wille, slepestou? seestow this peple, / Hou bisy thei ben aboute the mase?” (I.5-6). The poem does not set out from these “peple” only to leave them decisively behind in order to follow a lone, questing narrator in his individual search for truth and salvation. We see these people over and again: praying, playing, plowing, cooking, buying, selling, lawyering, counseling, ruling, lying, cheating, confessing, repenting, setting off on pilgrimage, rejecting conversion, singing, idling, resisting, eating, drinking, hungering, being redeemed, born again into a pentecostal Church, and suffering fragmentation and bewilderment. Holy Church’s question to Wille about how he sees these people proves, then, to be a determinative one, both for Wille and for the structure of the poem. The salvation of Wille’s soul (Wille’s question to Holy Church)

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<sup>19</sup> Simpson, “*Piers Plowman*”: *An Introduction*, 115.

seems to have everything to do with how Wille sees “this peple” (Holy Church’s question to Wille). In this respect, over and above Leute’s question — how a truth-telling critic can licitly “say as he sees” — I find Langland pursuing a far more fundamental, and surprisingly unsettling, motivation: how might one see as Holy Church says? But what resources for judgment of this field and its folk does Holy Church impart to Wille? This question has implications for the poem’s theology and politics, and also, in no way in isolation from these first two, its poetics. As Simpson has argued, for example: “However much the author of *Piers Plowman* expressed his sense of the dangers of writing as he did, the poem itself manifests a profound and daring commitment to fiction.”<sup>20</sup> Yet on Simpson’s own account of the poem, again, Holy Church presents a *threat* to this daring commitment from within. In large measure, this authority must be heard so as to be overcome if Langland’s poem is to find a way to go on. In Holy Church, as Simpson would have it, we meet an ideological and poetic impasse, which subsequent passus in Langland’s poem will have to find a way around and perhaps beyond.

For Simpson, Holy Church is in fact a crucial figure for Langland’s poetic progress, but largely insofar as she represents an initial “unitary” ideal that the poem seems at first to admire but soon subjects to a sustained and searching reformist criticism. Wille’s first lesson in judgment comes from this “authoritarian” figure, whose “closed” forms of speech and “completed” judgments seem initially to foreclose all possibility of fiction and exploratory modes of interpretation (*Introduction* 21, 25). In the Prologue and Passus I we instead find ourselves in a world of “treuthe” construed as “unremitting

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<sup>20</sup> Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 342.

secular and divine justice,” grounded in a “strict, Old Testament” vision of God as well as the hierarchies of a feudal society (34; 77, cf. 29). Holy Church conceives of God as a “feudal lord,” and so she unsurprisingly teaches Wille about the virtues of “vertical fidelity between retainers and lords” (33). Langland goes on to put these literary, theological, and social “closures” to searching scrutiny, as he follows each out to a point of crisis. In Wille’s own “acute and fearful discomfort” in the face of Holy Church’s vision of God as “Treuthe,” Langland is “provoked either to abandon, or to seek to transform, the social and ecclesiastical institutions to which he makes his initial commitment.” So “despite his initial commitment to ‘closed’ literary forms” like estates satire, the *oraculum* dream vision, and the sermon, Langland “ultimately creates a profoundly original and open-ended text” (34-5). As *Piers Plowman* searches out the relations between justice and love, Simpson argues, we discover “competing voices *within* the institution of Holy Church” (218). The poem’s broader “movement,” then, is “from allegiance to feudal, authoritarian, vertically organized institutions (where the dominant quality is ‘truthe’) to fundamentally non-hierarchical, brotherly, horizontally organised institutions (where the dominant quality is charity).” Simpson identifies analogous psychological and poetic movements here, from the rational and analytic to the affective and synthetic. The discourses the poem takes up move from “those whose authority is centred outside the self, to those whose authority is centred in the self” (219). In such movements a basic satirical strategy is at work, which Simpson suggests poems like *Pierce the Plowman’s Crede* and *Mum and the Sothsegger* learn from *Piers Plowman*: “to pretend trust in certain institutional figures (e.g. friars) initially, but to have the reader recognize the inadequacy of these apparently authoritative sources of truth”

(*Introduction* 227, n. 32). Just so Langland's poem deals with various of its putative authorities, not least Holy Church. As Simpson puts this point elsewhere: "While Langland never explicitly rejects the authoritarian figure of Holy Church represented in Passus I, the narrative strategy of the poem is to expose the shortcomings of institutions precisely by acts of apparent submission" (*Reform and Cultural Revolution* 356-57). Corresponding to this picture of Holy Church's imposing authority, Simpson imagines potentially dreary prospects for how the poem might have gone on in response to Holy Church's instruction. As he puts it:

for Holy Church all the senses of 'truthe' form a coherent, self-supporting conceptual whole, in which theology and 'sociology' are not discrepant. If the rest of *Piers Plowman* did nothing but elaborate different aspects of this coherent cluster of ideas, then we would certainly describe the poem as conservative in a rather uninteresting way. (*Introduction* 34)

Of course, Simpson does not think the movement of *Piers Plowman* consists in such an "elaboration" of Holy Church's "coherent cluster of ideas." Importantly so, since at stake in the poem's response to Holy Church's teaching is Langland's whole fictive enterprise. Ultimately, Simpson argues, Langland's poem pursues a polyvocality that this authority will not, and apparently cannot, admit. The poem ultimately discovers a "concept" of "Holy Church" that "contains many discourses, each with separate, often rival claims to authority" (35). But Langland has given us, in Simpson's view, both a peculiar way of setting out for this goal and a potentially stifling way of beginning a poem. Here Simpson cites a particular literary mode Langland seems prominently to reject in the world of "treuthe" he envisions in the Prologue and early passus. With Holy Church as the poem's inaugural authority, Langland "seems to disallow any possibilities for the

literary play of fiction, of the kind we find in Chaucer,” that is, “the play of ironies that result from an untrustworthy voice” (*Introduction* 24).

In an important exploration of subjectivity in *Piers Plowman*, David Lawton has posed the problematic Holy Church leaves the poem with in terms similar to Simpson’s.<sup>21</sup> Lawton discerns two levels of movement from this point in the poem. On one level, that of discourse, Langland can move from the early exchange with Holy Church in multiple, competing directions. He can picture Wille across a range of genres and institutional contexts, showing him to be a “subject in process,” a “process of displaced subjectivity which is the process of the poem.” On this level Langland’s poem proves itself to be a richly dialogic text. Yet another “narrative” level might be pursued, and indeed has been favored by many modern readers. On this level, Lawton argues, the poem tends toward a monologic “single Truth.” Wille has received a “doctrinally sound gloss from an authoritative glossator, Holy Church, encapsulating all the poem’s orthodox theology.” From here the poem can simply depict an erring persona who needs to learn his lesson — though, once more, if the poem is not to run out of steam just after leaving the station, Wille cannot learn his lesson *too* quickly. “To listen to reason would foreclose the poem: there would be no more call for narrative fiction.” On this level we can hear Simpson’s remark that, were the poem to pursue a mere “elaboration” of Holy Church’s authoritative glossing, we might have a rather plodding pilgrim’s progress. But as both Lawton and Simpson acknowledge, that is not in fact what we do have, and the poem goes on in a much more complicated and wide-ranging way. So Lawton finds it more persuasive to follow Langland’s capacious, ruminative poetry along discursive rather

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<sup>21</sup> David Lawton, “The Subject of *Piers Plowman*”; the following quotations at 15.

than teleologically “narrative” lines. In this way, the “rejection of an authorized gloss throws the text, together with its subject (for text and subject are reciprocal), into a ceaseless questioning of received ideology.”

In response to Simpson’s and Lawton’s readings, we might yet wonder if there are further possibilities for construing Holy Church and the authority and resources she represents in *Piers Plowman*. With Simpson we might see Wille’s exchange with Holy Church as a crucial point of departure for the poem’s self-reflective depiction of Wille himself and for its “movement” more broadly. And yet we might press Simpson on his characterization of Holy Church’s teaching and the terms it affords Wille and Langland’s poem. As I shall argue below, Holy Church in fact provides a grammar and a pedagogy crucial to Langland’s ambitious poem that do not comfortably square with Simpson’s account of this figure as an “authoritarian” specter or irritant in the poem’s array of interlocutory voices. Simpson’s reading elides important aspects of Holy Church’s teaching on its way to proclaiming that teaching “unitary” and her voice “authoritarian.” Certain aspects of Langland’s depiction of Holy Church may not square altogether comfortably with other aspects of that same depiction, and here we will need to attend carefully to the poem’s creative tensions, ruptures, and restless dialectical movement. Yet in light of just these features of Langland’s poem, we must also question any account of Holy Church that finds in her teaching a transparently “unitary” ideal.

Perhaps the constitution of the “subject” of *Piers Plowman*, as well, relies on a version of authority different from those allowed for in these critical readings. Langland’s poem doubtless pursues different possibilities for fiction from those just outlined as available alternatives: on the one hand, a Chaucerian play of ironies that

trades in readerly distrust or, on the other, a coupling of magisterial pronouncements and pious quiescence that allegedly threatens to foreclose on (or severely narrow) all fictional ways forward. Yet is the rejection of a Chaucerian ironizing mode so initially threatening to Langland's poetic progress as is here made out? If Langland's poetry displays its own local and particular ironies and skepticisms — as it surely and admirably does — what it refuses is to make such irony and skepticism global and fundamental. And if Langland refuses such primary ironies in the interest of a politics and poetics of “treuthe,” perhaps the latter, for him, involves something other than a univocal, authoritarian imagination. In this respect we might suggest too, *pace* Lawton, that Langland's Holy Church has *herself* offered an initial “mediation” that “challenges and de-authorizes” an alternative way of seeing, a way narrowly bounded in its imaginative horizons by what she calls the “mase.”<sup>22</sup> If, then, Langland rejects a Chaucerian mode of irony and depicts Holy Church as other than threatening to imaginative labor, he accordingly acknowledges the *learning* of a language to be a more fundamental, responsive, and endlessly wondrous practice than the critical pretense of standing outside one. For a poet who aspires to speak justly for others, and likewise to speak truthfully of and for himself, ironic detachment has decisive *imaginative* and *political* limits as well as theological ones.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lawton, “The Subject of *Piers Plowman*,” 21. Lawton is here referring to Langland's dialogical engagement with the institutional discourse of penitential manuals, whereby these latter are put “on a parity and in competition with other discourses, and other types of subjectivity.” Langland's poem itself “mediates” this authoritative discourse, thereby “challenging and de-authorizing” it.

<sup>23</sup> On irony as canny self-deception Terry Eagleton has written persuasively; see his *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 39-41. And for irony as an offense against truthfulness, of the kind necessary to make myself accountable to others and also to see them as accountable to me, see also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1999, repr. 2002), especially chs. 12-13. On Langland as a poet who aspires to speak for others, Geoffrey Shepherd



Before we turn to Langland's poem, it will be worth briefly sketching out a mode of inquiry available to Langland for which a foundational irony or suspicion would amount to an alien evasion. It will remain for us to see in this section how Langland might attempt to sustain such a mode of inquiry in fictional form.

We may look here to Alasdair MacIntyre's illuminating account of pedagogy in the Augustinian tradition. MacIntyre observes that a reader in this tradition is both interpreter of its key texts and him or herself interpreted by those same texts. The texts tell you who you are. But you also need a teacher to help you read them.

So the reader, like any learner within a craft-tradition, encounters apparent paradox at the outset, a Christian version of the paradox of Plato's *Meno*: it seems that only by learning what the texts have to teach can he or she come to read those texts aright, but also that only by reading them aright can he or she learn what the texts have to teach. The person in this predicament requires two things: a teacher and an obedient trust that what the teacher, interpreting the text, declares to be good reasons for transforming oneself into a different kind of person — and thus a different kind of reader — will turn out to be genuinely good reasons in the light afforded by that understanding of texts which becomes available only to the transformed self. The intending reader has to have inculcated into him or herself certain attitudes or dispositions, certain virtues, *before* he or she can know why these are to be accounted virtues. So a prerational reordering of the self has to occur before the reader can have any adequate standard by which to judge what is a good reason and what is not. And this reordering requires obedient trust, not only in the authority of this particular teacher, but in that of the whole tradition of interpretative commentary into which that teacher had had earlier him or herself to be initiated through his or her reordering and conversion.<sup>24</sup>

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has remarked: "[Langland] is precocious in that often he presents the inner life of the unvocal unassertive people who live in powerlessness and poverty and he draws them into the cultural reality of his time. This voice is not heard so clearly again for another four hundred years . . . ." See Shepherd, "Poverty in *Piers Plowman*," in *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R. H. Hilton*, ed. T. H. Aston, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 169-89, at 175.

<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990, repr. 2008), 82-3. An eloquent exposition of some of these themes in Augustine's thought may also be found in Robert Louis

This mode of inquiry presumes that I must *learn* to ask good questions, as well as to identify good answers. This learning requires training in affective dispositions, bodily comportment and habit, which it does not dissociate from intellectual training but regards as essential to it. Learning to speak for myself is itself no small task. In order so to learn I must be willing to hear the truth about myself from another. The recognition and acknowledgment of genuine authority — a recognition and acknowledgment called obedience — is on this account a virtue. The virtue of obedience requires my active discernment, moreover, in deciding just whom I do acknowledge as a genuine authority. The acquiescence to a figure whose *power* exceeds my own is not the substance of this virtue. And my teacher's particular language is not an optional extra, but a decisive way for me that I cannot simply evade by irony or critical distance. It is the language in which "I" am constituted and discovered in the first place. George Lindbeck has described catechesis, similarly, as the learning of a language: "the logic of coming to believe, because it is like that of learning a language, has little room for argument, but once one has learned to speak the language of faith, argument becomes possible."<sup>25</sup> Wille's exchange with Holy Church, in my view, is best seen as just such a scene of enabling instruction, grounded in trust and acknowledged dependence. Holy Church

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Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), ch. 7.

<sup>25</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 132. Also illuminating here is Charles Taylor's account of "webs of interlocution" in the formation of selfhood; see ch. 2 in Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). This chapter, called "The Self in Moral Space," has rich and fascinating relevance more generally for students of allegorical literature, a discourse in which the exploration of psychological landscapes — "moral space" — replete with maps, interlocutors, and the twists and turns of questing narrative, is explicit and constitutive. On obedience as a Christian virtue, see Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), ch. 8.

instructs Wille, as well, in a hermeneutics of “treuthe” and “false,” “charite” and “mercy,” that is hardly without profound imaginative potency or critical edge. How would one “elaborate,” practically or poetically, Holy Church’s vision of divine power in which Christ wills “no wo” toward his enemies but takes “pitee on that peple that paynede hym to dethe” (I.165, 167)? This is scarcely a “closed” question with an obvious answer, threatening to silence or imaginatively hobble any and all narrative fiction.<sup>26</sup> If Langland is pursuing what it might mean to see as Holy Church says, this “seeing as” is hardly a straightforward or anticlimactic matter.<sup>27</sup> There is also no reason why this question might not prove a deeply subversive one. And neither should we forget that Holy Church is *self*-critical, capable of some of the fiercest criticism in the poem regarding “men of holy chirche” (I.184-92). Finally, even as this authority descends from heaven, the “castel” of Truth, with all the trappings of divine sanction, she explicates an incarnational theology in which “heuene” begets itself of earth in love and so redefines what it is to be “myhtfull” in the first place (I.169). In so depicting this authority, Langland has not sacralized a contemporary institution beyond all scrutiny so much as drawn our attention to the *contingencies* of present arrangements in light of a Christological discipline. This is no way to mount a “unitary” defense of authority or an untroubled and “coherent” account of feudal ideology. It is, however, a remarkable way

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<sup>26</sup> As I show in my chapter on *Mum and the Sothsegger*, for example, a contemporary poet, while clearly in some ways drawing inspiration from Langland, was capable of reading Holy Church’s vision here with strikingly different theological and political inflections. What *Piers Plowman* itself is to make of this vision is hardly a foregone conclusion, as *Mum*’s divergent reading affirms.

<sup>27</sup> On the complexities of vision, its disciplinary objectifications, and the forms of life which enable it, I have found very instructive Brian Goldstone and Stanley Hauerwas, “Disciplined Seeing: Forms of Christianity and Forms of Life,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109.4 (2010): 765-90.

to display the grounds of acknowledgment in which a searching poetic vision might take root.

So what is Holy Church teaching Wille to see? As Passus I opens, the narrator claims that he will now “shewe” us the meaning of the grand vision he has related in the Prologue: “What the montaigne bymeneth and the merke dale / And the feld ful of folk Y shal you fair shewe” (I.1-2). What follows is not, however, a straightforward first-person explication of a visionary text. Instead, the poem turns immediately to a “louely lady” clothed in linen, who descends from the castle of Truth (I.3). The authoritative narratorial “Y,” who initially claims power to teach, gives way to this lady’s prior instruction, and we see Wille become her pupil. The narrator’s terms of explanation cannot do without Holy Church’s, but only proceed through them. This particular form of beginning is surely not without relevance for the poem’s ending.

Calling Wille by name, Holy Church begins her instruction with ostension, pointing. As to just what is being “shewn” here, a good deal turns on the significance of Holy Church’s demonstratives:

Wille, slepestou? seestow this peple,  
Hou bisy thei ben aboute the mase?  
The moste party of this peple that passeth on this erthe,  
Haue thei worschip in this world thei wilneth no bettere;  
Of othere heuene then here thei halde no tale. (I.5-9)

But which people is “*this* peple”? Whose world is “*this* world”? Where and when is “*here*”? One have might discerned at this point, with Morton Bloomfield, strands of a monastic *de contemptu mundi* tradition of Christian satire.<sup>28</sup> “At its most characteristic,” Bloomfield explains, the monastic *de contemptu* complaint “lists the sorrows and

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<sup>28</sup> Bloomfield, “*Piers Plowman*” as a *Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, 28-30.

sufferings of life and either directly or indirectly argues for the repudiation of the world and the acceptance of the next world as the only reality” (28). Bloomfield notes that monastic anthropology is “ambiguous in its polarity,” insofar as the world human beings inhabit is both “contemptible as an evil temptation and a transitory state” while also “admirable as the work of the Creator” (29). It is also true that satire itself is a “most complicated literary mode” with a long and varied genealogy. Yet Bloomfield insists, finally, that the *de contemptu* tradition is decisive both for Langland and for Christian satire more generally:

the center of Christian satire is the monastic contempt of the world with its long catalogue of the sorrows and sufferings of our transient existence. The sins stressed were those of pride, avarice, and lust. It is out of this center that we must trace the literary origin of much of the satirical element in works such as *Piers Plowman*.

Has Bloomfield, however, sufficiently attended to just what “world” is being identified by Holy Church? And does “contempt” define the posture this authority recommends toward it? I would suggest, rather, that the “world” Holy Church points to and asks Wille to see is neither an undifferentiated object for his contempt in light of “the next world as the only reality,” nor simply a generalized and naturalized “transitory state” in the first place. A potent word for Holy Church, *world* encompasses different senses and applications. And of “this world” now before her and Wille, Langland’s Prologue has in fact given us a range of notably particular descriptions.

As the poem opens, Wille sets out into the “world” to hear “wondres” (Pr. 4). On a May morning in the Malvern Hills, he tells us, he falls asleep and dreams of “Al the welthe of the world and the wo bothe” (Pr. 10). To the east he sees a tower, where he believes Truth resides; to the west, he sees a deep dale, the dwelling place of Death. In

between lies a “fair feld ful of folk . . . / Of alle manere men, the mene and the riche, / Worchyng and wandryng as this world ascuth” (Pr. 19-21). In “this world,” some plow, playing very seldom and winning from the earth by their hard labor what others destroy by their gluttony. Some apparel themselves pridefully in fine clothing. Some are “ankeres” and “eremites” and busy themselves with prayers and penances, leading lives of strict religious discipline “for loue of oure Lord” (Pr. 28). Some choose trade (“chaffare”), and these “ythryueth,” as it seems, in “this world” (Pr. 34). Others make mirth as “mynstrels”: their labor seems more dubious, since while they swear great oaths and invent “foule fantasies,” they have all the “wytt” they need to “worche yf thei wolde” (Pr. 36-7). (The poet lingers critically at a profession he and we know bears a family resemblance to his own.) Some are professional pilgrims, full of “lyes” about their great journeys (Pr. 50). And some are friars in any of the four orders, preaching for profit, glossing the gospel for gain, and contradicting other masters in academic disputation out of their own covetousness. The poet pays special attention to the Franciscans, who have, he says, turned charity into a “chapman,” a merchant, in the business of confessing rich lords (Pr. 62). “And but holi chirche and charite choppe adoun such shryuars,” the poet remarks ominously, “The most mischief on molde mounteth vp faste” (Pr. 64-5). We now see a preaching pardoner, wielding a bull with a (dubiously attained) bishop’s seal, who offers absolution for revenue; this he shares with a colluding a parish priest. Some of these priests abandon their parishes for London, where a livelihood is easier to make. Next we see those bishops, bachelors, masters, and doctors who hold high office in English law and government and take on the interests and practices of these institutions to the neglect of their priestly duties. Conscience appears

here to accuse these clerics of encouraging “Ydolatrie” among those in their care (Pr. 96). Wille goes on to relate how he sees the “power” St. Peter has to bind and loose in the Church, a power left by Christ in love among the cardinal virtues, those hinges (Lat., *cardo*) on the gates to Christ’s kingdom (Pr. 128-33). He then sees a king with knighthood following behind him, and sees Kind Wit make clerks to counsel the king and protect the commons. Kind Wit likewise contrives crafts for the commoners, who plow to the “profit” of all people (Pr. 146). In the king’s court we catch a glimpse of barristers at work, who both plead for pennies and go “mum” when the right sum is put before them (Pr. 165-66). Next we get a parliamentary fable of mice and rats who argue about how to deal with an arbitrary and dangerous cat (at one point a kitten, likened to the boy king Richard II). Should they hang a bell around his neck, so as to know when he approaches, or let him be, lest they cause more trouble for themselves? A final voice, a mouse, counsels silence and inaction, maintaining that they should all wait on the “meschief” of fortune to do its chastening work, since even if they get rid of this cat another will just come along, and anyway, they can all hardly rule themselves (Pr. 215). The Prologue draws to a close with Wille’s ticking off a swelling list of people he has yet seen in his vision: barons, burghers, bondmen, bakers, brewers, butchers, weavers, tailors, tanners, ditchers, and more. Finally, we hear the lively voice of a cook (“Hote pyes, hotel!”) and a group of bibulous taverners. “Al this Y saw slepynge,” Wille reports, “and seuene sythes more” (Pr. 235).

However the poem will later ask us to understand some of the normative inflections of the Prologue’s descriptions, it should certainly be clear even here that “this people” is not just any people, “this world” not just any world, “here” not just any place or

time. Holy Church undoubtedly points at a world of universal, cosmic depth, situated between the castle of Truth and the dungeon of Death (or as she calls the latter at l.57-60, the castle of Care and dwelling place of Wrong). But this is nonetheless a very particular field of folk. The evocative realism with which Langland concludes the Prologue, in which we hear lively, particular English voices, underscores this point. Moreover, though his critical powers have been meted out liberally enough in a range of unabashedly leading descriptions, Langland has drawn special critical attention to a particular group, the mendicant friars. In the name of “charite,” these friars would turn confession into a commodity. “And but holi chirche and charite choppe adoun such shryuars / The most meschief on molde mounteth vp faste” (Pr. 64-5). Langland’s sense of practical if carefully imprecise urgency here (what exactly would it be for “holi church and charite” to “choppe adoun such shryuars”?) is born out of an implied understanding that what he describes so ominously is not a necessary or inevitable state of affairs. Proper action, whatever that should prove to be, might offer some remedy. In the poem’s final two passus, it will show us the birth of an apostolic Church in which the friars play no role, and only then allegorize the Church’s later welcoming of the friars into its communion as officially acknowledged preachers and confessors. This is a move the poem regards as decisive and disastrous, as foreshadowed in the Prologue’s dark warning. Though the poem also takes care to treat the friars’ entry into Unity as symptomatic of still larger issues in ecclesial life — and so not as a simplistically isolable fall from grace. Yet these mendicants, the poem at last tells us, urgently require a “fyndynge,” a provision for their livelihood, since in their avowed “nede” they flatter rather than speak truth (XXII.383). In short, then, as the poem enables us to see in



retrospect, the “world” Holy Church points to in Passus I is a *historically contingent* one, even as it fully retains universal and cosmic significance.

Apart from monastic *contemptus mundi* traditions, Wille might have encountered another very different mode of instruction in learning how to construe “this peple,” “this erthe,” the value of “worschip in this world,” and his own “soule” in relation to these. In Boethius’s *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Philosophy attempts to parochialize Boethius’s preoccupations with worldly reputation by comparing the world, from the perspective of scientific observation, to a mathematical point. I quote here from Chaucer’s translation, the *Boece*:

For see now and considere how litel and how voyde of alle prys is thylk glorie. Certeyn thyng es, as thou hast leerned by the demonstracioun of astronomye, that al the envyrounyng of the erthe aboute ne halt but the resoun of a prykke at regard of the gretnesse of hevene; that is to seyn that, yif ther were makid comparysoun of the erthe to the gretnesse of hevene, men wolde juggle in al that the erthe ne heelde no space.<sup>29</sup>

Philosophy goes on to explain, moreover, that, given all the “naciouns” in this “prykke” of a world, with all their diversity of “tonges,” “maneris,” and forms of life (“reasoun of hir lyvyng”), and given the impediments to travel and commerce, the names of “synguler men” and even of whole “citees” will almost certainly find comparatively little renown. Likewise do written records contain no guarantees. Even if writers remember you, texts and the subjects of texts can be forgotten along with their writers. The “perdurablete” or immortality one might seek in fame is, finally, of “no comparysoun” to the “endles spaces of eternyte,” the “perdurablete that is endlees” (p. 419). In actions performed “for the audience of peple and for idel rumours,” one forsakes “the grete

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<sup>29</sup> *De Consolatione*, II, prosa 7; from Geoffrey Chaucer, *Boece*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., edited by Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 418.

worthynesse of conscience and of vertu” and seeks one’s “gerdouns [rewards] of the smale wordes of straunge folk.” Virtuous action requires a sturdier perspective. If the “soule,” which bears in itself the “science of gode werkes” (i.e., “conscience”), were “unbownden fro the prysone of the erthe” and could ascend “frely to the hevene,” would it not “despiseth . . . al erthly ocupacioun” and “rejoyseth that it is exempt fro alle erthly thynges”?

Once more, this is a strikingly different mode of instruction from the one Holy Church undertakes with Wille. Earth, for her, is not a “prysone” but a “mase”; she asks not that Wille “despiseth” all earthly occupation but that he discern among its variety. There is a shared vocabulary here — “erthe,” “peple,” “soule,” “hevene,” “glorye”/“worschip” — which I have tried to highlight in Chaucer’s contemporary translation of Boethius’s text. Yet in drawing Wille’s attention to “worschip in this world,” Holy Church does not then deflate the pretensions of such “worschip” in view of the grand scope of “hevene” or “eternyte.” She does not attempt to show Wille that such “worschip” is fragile, subject to the barriers of language, culture, and politics, as well as to the whims of writers and readers. Instead, in view of the Prologue’s display of power dynamics in “this world,” where “Ydolatrie” has been identified as an all too common form of worship, Holy Church’s phrase “worschip in this world” suggests a twofold significance: both human recognition, like fame or “glorye,” and religious adoration. For Holy Church, the two are intimately conjoined. She asks Wille not to ascend by philosophical speculation to the viewpoint of “eternyte,” but to see, here and now, what “hevene” seems *immanent* to the world before him, his world, what modes of worship really organize it. She asks him to see, too, how “worschip” is afforded or not afforded

“peple” in this world, and how some seem incapable in light of such pursuits of wanting anything “bettere,” of envisioning any “othere heuene then here.”

How can one distinguish the “secular” from the “religious” or “sacred” in this approach? As Wille himself asks, “Mercy, madame, what may this be to mene?” (I.11). Holy Church, in fact, does not foist any such secular/religious analytic distinction on the world she describes. She does, however, go on to tell Wille about a countervailing form of “worschipe.”

“The tour vppon tofte,” quod she, “Treuthe is ther-ynne,  
And wolde that ye wroghton as his word techeth.  
For he is fader of fayth and formor of alle;  
To be fayful to hym yaf yow fyue wittes  
For to worschipe hym ther-with the whiles ye lyuen here.” (I.12-16)

The relationship posited between Holy Church and Wille here, in which Wille is taught a language of right “worschipe,” resembles that envisioned in a third textual analogue we might consider, the contemporary literature of catechetical and penitential instruction.<sup>30</sup> In manuals like *The Lay Folk’s Catechism* and John Mirk’s *Instructions for Parish Priests*, for example, one would encounter a program of instruction centered on the Creed, the Ten Commandments and Christ’s summary of the law in the dual precept to love God and neighbor, the seven works of mercy, the seven virtues, the seven vices, and the seven sacraments. Similarly, in a “form of confession” designed for lay use one might learn to inhabit a confessional voice by attending to one’s own conscience in light

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed survey of this material, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), ch. 2; see also Norman Tanner and Sethina Watson, “Least of the Laity: The Minimum Requirements for a Medieval Christian,” *Journal of Medieval History* 32 (2006): 395-423, and Goering, “The Internal Forum and the Literature of Penance and Confession” (cited in n. 13 above). On Langland’s engagement with penitential handbooks, which offer an important “non-teleological model” of the moral life for his poem, see too Lawton, “The Subject of *Piers Plowman*.”

of the seven deadly sins, the Ten Commandments, the five bodily wits, the seven works of mercy both corporal and spiritual, the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, the seven sacraments, and the eight beatitudes.<sup>31</sup> Where Holy Church's exchange with Wille differs from these, however, is not only, as we shall see further, in range and depth of expression, but also in narrative placement. We have seen a host of "men of holy chirche" in the Prologue whom Holy Church herself will deeply implicate in what she calls "worschip in this world" (l.171-98). She explicitly denounces a variety of material practices associated with such "worschip." And while this figure descends impressively from the castle of Truth, again, Langland's poem does not use this authoritative manner of appearance simply to represent a sacralization of the order, personnel, liturgies, or literature of the fourteenth-century Western Church. We are left at once to affirm Holy Church's authority and yet to puzzle, with Wille, over just who she is and where (if?) we might have seen her before. This amounts to a distinctive hermeneutic pressure, put on a language of instruction Holy Church otherwise might well share, at least in part, with contemporary manuals of catechesis.

If, as I have argued, "this world" is a particular one and not simply a generalized earthly habitation, this changes how we are able to see both what Holy Church teaches and what she expects of Wille.<sup>32</sup> In this light we can consider, for example, Holy

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<sup>31</sup> On the "form of confession," see Michael E. Cornett, "The Form of Confession," (cited in n. 13 above).

<sup>32</sup> In this respect this scene from Passus I and II is worth comparing to the vision of "Mydellerthe" in Passus XIII. Here Wille sees sun, sea, birds, beasts, as well as man, in poverty and plenty, peace and war, bliss and unhappiness. This picture is not simply a generalized picture of the world either, but one in which, somewhat paradoxically, Wille sees a whole creaturely world ruled by "resoun," *except* among those outliers, human beings. This world is just as teeming with life as in the Prologue, but we approach it by way of non-human animal life (here the animals are literal: not the mice, rats, and cats of fable, as in the Prologue). This is the world

Church's view of worship and its relationship to practical action. Holy Church explains that Truth wills that "alle" should do as "his word techeth": in order for us to be "fayful" in this way, Truth has given us "fyue wittes / For to worschipe hym ther-with the whiles ye lyuen here" (I.13-16). We note then that action, sensuous engagement with the world, for Holy Church, is bound up with "worschipe." Truth expects an embodied form of faithfulness. Yet Holy Church also locates Wille "here" as a pilgrim: one neither habitually, naively immanent to the field she has been pointing to, nor presuming to stand outside it in radical autonomy and discontinuity. This is a call for a different form of imagination from that inhabited by those people who "halde no tale" of any "othere heuene then here." It is a call to a different economy of desire as well, since these same people "wilneth no bettere" than "worschipe in this world." The play on Wille's name — "Wille, slepestou? seestow this peple . . . ? . . . thei wilneth no bettere" — focuses this set of distinctions in Wille's own identity, as an indirect but powerful question to him about his implication in "this world" and the possibilities for his seeing it afresh.

Holy Church goes on to explain that Truth has commanded the elements to "help yow alle tymes / And brynge forth youre bilyue [livelihood] . . . / And in mesure, thow much were, to make yow attese" (I.17-19). So the created world is good and under the sovereignty of God's care. Holy Church envisions such an ordering of the world to be intrinsic to flourishing human life, one in which we are "attese." Truth has given in

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of "Kynde," as Holy Church had instructed Wille in the world of "Treuthe." Here beasts "reule hem al by resoun," while human beings, though "most yliche" Kynde himself "of wit and of werkes," seem governed by something else altogether (XIII.191-92). This is a playful gloss on an old theme: human beings stand out in the world not because they are *reasonable*, but because they are, all too distinctively, not. But if Kynde displays the "wit" of non-human animal life so as to engender Wille's "louye" of Kynde himself, Holy Church describes a way of worship that she takes to stand in stark contrast to that of a world that seems all too "natural" to Wille.

abundance three things “nidefole” to us: food, clothing, and drink (I.21). These are to be enjoyed, however, in “mesure.”

Mesure is medecyne, thogh thow mucche yerne;  
Al is nat good to the gost that the gott ascuth  
Ne liflode to the lycame [body, flesh] that lef is to the soule.  
Leef nat thy lycame, for a lyare hym techeth,  
Which is the wrecchede world, wolde the bigyle;  
For the fend and thy flesch folewen togederes  
And that seeth the soule and sayth hit the in herte  
And wysseth the to ben ywar what wolde the desseyue. (I.33-40)

Holy Church does not imagine she is the first teacher Wille has studied under, nor that the account of rightful “bilyue” or livelihood she has just given him is the only such account on offer. Indeed, Langland seems to play here on *bilyue* as both “livelihood” and “belief.”<sup>33</sup> “Leef nat thy lycame,” Holy Church says, “for a lyare hym techeth.” Wille’s own body, which Holy Church acknowledges to be full of need, is also no blank slate; it has already been written on. Holy Church does not say his body is a lying teacher, but that a liar has taught his body. She acknowledges that Wille is a creature full of desire already, a much-yearning, embodied creature. Yet she attempts to help him make distinctions in identifying what is “good” for him as just such a creature. After all, this cannot be a dualism she is recommending as “medycyne,” since she has first told Wille that his “fyue wittes” are a good gift, and that the “elementis” of the earth are likewise gifts, in the good use of which we might be “attese.” Instead, the world, the flesh, and the devil become associated in Holy Church’s teaching with powers in the very particular world she has been teaching Wille how to see. These powers run right through Wille’s

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<sup>33</sup> See the entries, respectively, for “bileve” (n.) and “bilive” (n.) in the *Middle English Dictionary*. The first is defined as 1a) “Faith in, or devotion to, a religious institution, doctrine, or precept”; 2a) “A body of religious doctrines, a religion or faith, a Church; esp. the doctrines of Christianity, the Christian religion or Church”; and 3) “Confidence, trust; also, conviction.” The second is defined as “the means of subsistence, a livelihood (as of food, clothing, shelter).”

own body, like a rival set of inscriptions. In turn, however, Holy Church does not treat Wille as wholly alien to her instruction. She makes common cause with his “soule” and what it already, however inchoately, “seeth” and “sayth” in his heart.

At this point we may ask just what sort of anthropology Holy Church is articulating, and where it leaves Wille and Langland’s poem to go from here. Questions of Holy Church’s authority, Wille’s powers as a practical reasoner in his own right, and the poem’s fictive and discursive resources are here all bound up. If there is a principle of interpretation, a power or habit of seeing, that Holy Church can appeal to in Wille, what sort of integrity does it have? How deeply tarnished by sin and the distortions of the “mase” does Holy Church take this visionary principle to be? What form of life does she take it to emerge from? What virtues might enable and sustain it? In what particular stories and language does Holy Church locate and identify such a way of seeing? Following on the heels of Holy Church’s remarks about “mesure” in the use of worldly goods, Wille presses her with further questions: first about the “moneye of this molde, that men so faste kepen” and then about the “vnsemely” deep dale he sees opposite Truth’s tower (I.42, 55-6). For Holy Church, trust in this world’s “tresor” links these two topics. In response to her teaching on these points, Wille reports, “Thenne hadde Y wonder in my wit what woman [s]he were” (I.68). Here Holy Church names herself, but as she insists, not as one whom Wille has met for the first time:

“Holy Churche Y am,” quod she, “thou oughtest me to knowe;  
Y undirfenge [received] the formeste and fre man the made.  
Thow broughtest me borewes [guarantors, godparents] my biddinge  
to fulfille,  
To leue on me and loue me al thy lyf-tyme.” (I.72-5)

In light of this recalled baptismal scene, Holy Church's earlier naming of Wille upon her first appearance ("Wille, slepestou?") takes on a new potency (I.5-6). Here Wille falls on his knees, asking for grace and for Holy Church's prayers for his soul. He asks moreover, "kenne [teach] me kyndly on Crist to bileue," and that Holy Church also teach him about no "tresor" at all but rather "How Y may saue my soule" (I.78-80). In so asking Wille has taken up language already used by his baptismal teacher. Concluding her ostensive description of the "mase" and its authorities, as we have seen, Holy Church had counted Wille's "soule" capable on some level of an alternative vision. Her teaching had not trampled his own powers, but affirmed them. She had appealed to what Wille's soul saw and said in his "herte," declaring that it counseled, at least, wariness of what would deceive him. Now she reveals herself as an agent of Wille's liberation and reminds him of his baptismal identity, an identity that we catch up to *in via*, extending as it does beyond the narrative time of the poem. Returning to Holy Church's affirmation of the powers of his "soule," Wille asks, how can he "saue" it?

Holy Church responds to Wille's questions with an account of "treuthe" that she refuses to disentangle from a vision of God as love: "When alle tresores ben tried, treuthe is the beste — / I do hit vppon *Deus caritas* to deme the sothe" (I.81-2; cf. 1 John 4:8, 16). One who is true of his tongue and his two hands, who does good works accordingly and wills no "ylle" to anyone, participates in God's own life as both "treuthe" and "*caritas*." Such a person, Holy Church affirms, is a "god by the gospel": "lyk oure Lord" and capable of healing others ("graunte may hele") (I.86-7). Lucifer, by contrast, while beginning as an "archangel of heuene, on of goddes knyghtes," sought to be "lyk his lord" without holding to the way of truth (I.108). Lucifer followed his "luther wille,"



lusting for the power of the “almyghty” (I.110-11). In consequence, rather than “hele,” health or healing, “helle is ther he is” (I.120). In his “pruyde” Lucifer failed and fell, and his “felawes” (yet another bit of wordplay from Langland) fell with him (I.129, 120).

Yet as Wille listens to Holy Church in wonder, he cannot quite link up what she says to the “seeing” and “saying” she has asked him to attend to in his heart. He knows enough to ask her to teach him about Christ, but claims not to have learned “*kyndly* on Crist to bileue.” Again, he claims to lack resources Holy Church assures him he has. “I haue no kynde knowing . . . yut mot ye kenne me bettere / By what wey it wexeth and wheder out of my menynges” (I.137-38). Not simply pinpointing what he perceives to be a present epistemological lack, Wille even wonders if the “wey” to truth is open to one such as himself at all. He does not simply ask Holy Church for guidance in the “wey,” but also for assurance that this way does not lie beyond his “menynges” (purposes or intentions, understanding, or perhaps memory).<sup>34</sup> Holy Church replies with no dissembling: “Thow dotede daffe!” (I.139). She goes on to affirm, more explicitly than she has done to this point, what the “kynde knowynge that kenet [teaches]” Wille in his “herte” has to say: “For to louye thy lord leuest of alle, / Dey [Die] rather then do eny dedly synne” (I.141-43). Her pronouncement has the ring of a truism, of the kind medieval scholastic theologians often used to gloss that seed or spark of practical reason they called *synderesis*. As Thomas Aquinas explains, “Synderesis is said to be the law of our intellect because it is a habit containing the precepts of the natural law, which are the first principles of human actions [habitus continens praecepta legis naturalis, quae sunt prima principia operum humanorum]” (*S.T.* I-II.94.1, rep. ob. 2). Such unerring precepts

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<sup>34</sup> See the entry for “mening(e)” (ger.), 1-4, in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

find more concrete “determinations” (determinationes) in both divine law and, when justly conceived and applied, human law. The first and most basic of such precepts is simply “good is to be pursued and done, and evil is to be avoided” (*S.T.* I-II.94.2, resp.). Of these first precepts or principles, informing both speculative and practical reason, we have “natural” knowledge (*naturali cognitione primorum principiorum*). Synderesis was often figured, as well, as a voice, murmuring against evil. Just so Holy Church has affirmed that watchful voice in Wille’s heart that “wysseth” him, as she claims, to beware of what would deceive him. And now she tells him he has a “kynde knowynge” teaching him to love God and avoid mortal sin at all costs, even death. Wille’s deep implication in the “mase” notwithstanding, the way, Holy Church insists, is most certainly not outside his “menynges.”<sup>35</sup>

And yet, above all, the way is not beyond Wille because he has already undertaken it. While Wille might have been heartened to hear of his natural powers of reasoning, Holy Church has not primarily addressed Wille on this level, as a rational creature considered in abstract terms. She has addressed him as a baptized Christian.

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<sup>35</sup> For treatments of *synderesis* in medieval scholastic thought and beyond, especially in its close relationship to conceptions of conscience, see Robert A. Greene, “Synderesis, the Spark of Conscience, in the English Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52.2 (1991): 195-219; Greene, “Instinct of Nature: Natural Law, Synderesis, and the Moral Sense,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58.2 (1997): 173-98; D. Odon Lottin, *Psychologie et morale aux XII<sup>e</sup> et XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Louvain, 1942-60), vol. II: 103-349; Michael G. Baylor, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1977); Timothy C. Potts, “Conscience,” in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, repr. 1990), 687-704; and Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). On Jerome’s foundational commentary on the book of Ezekiel in this discussion and its relation to Origen’s thought on conscience, see Douglas Kries, “Origen, Plato, and Conscience (Synderesis) in Jerome’s Ezekiel Commentary,” *Traditio* 57 (2002): 67-83. For a brilliant brief reflection on *conscientia*, *synderesis*, and *prudentia* in Aquinas see too Herbert McCabe, “Aquinas on Good Sense,” in McCabe, *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 152-65.

She has recalled Wille to a specific history and formation: “thou oughtest me to knowe; / Y undirfenge the formeste and fre man the made.” In what counts as “natural,” accordingly, Holy Church is somewhat mischievous with scholastic terms and distinctions. In her teaching, *kynde knowynge* comes to signify less a natural capacity considered apart from Christ than a new “natural” graced by Christ. In this sense, while Wille might be reassured to learn of his natural capacities as a knower and moral agent, he appears to be asking for a gift of knowledge of a different order — more like the gifts of understanding (*intellectus*), knowledge (*scientia*), wisdom (*sapientia*), and counsel (*consilium*) that Aquinas calls the infused gifts of the Holy Spirit pertaining to human knowing (*cognitio*).

Aquinas affirms that “both learned and simple folk are bound to explicit faith in the mysteries of Christ, chiefly as regards those which are observed throughout the Church, and publicly proclaimed, such as the articles which refer to the Incarnation” (*S.T.* II-II.2.7, resp.). Likewise is it “impossible to believe explicitly in the mystery of Christ without faith in the Trinity,” so that all are also “bound to explicit faith in the mystery of the Trinity” (II-II.2.8, resp.).<sup>36</sup> In these terms, in asking, “kenne me kyndly on Crist to bileue,” Wille is displaying an explicit faith in Christ and seeking further understanding.

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<sup>36</sup> For an overview of the obligations of knowledge and practice in the medieval Church, both as these obligations were theorized and as they were in fact implemented and pursued, as well as received by laity, see Tanner and Watson, “Least of the Laity” (cited in n. 30 above). On the question of implicit and explicit faith, see especially 399-403. Tanner and Watson stress medieval theologians’ generally “tolerant attitude” on this point, resting on the efficacy these theologians attributed to implicit faith; likewise the authors find a large body of legislation requiring a minimum knowledge for the clergy but a “paucity” of such legislation regarding what the laity were required to know. However, above I do cite instances where Aquinas speaks of what is required explicitly of all Christians, namely belief “of some kind” (*aliqua*liter) in the mystery of Christ’s incarnation, passion, and resurrection as well as, correspondingly, in the mystery of the Trinity. Likewise, Aquinas does not restrict the cognitive graces I list here to the learned, but sees them as common, if in varying degrees, among all those sanctified by grace. See *S.T.* II-II.2.7-8 and II-II.8-9, respectively.

Yet the “gift of understanding” (*donum intellectus*), Aquinas maintains, is in fact, like the gift of charity, already in some measure “in all those who have sanctifying grace” (II-II.8.4, resp.). Those in a state of grace enjoy some measure of rectitude of will, but the will cannot be directed rightly toward a good it does not know, at least in part. So Aquinas presupposes “some supernatural truth” known by all in a state of grace, toward which their right will can tend. This gift of understanding entails a “right estimation of the end” of one’s striving (II-II.8.5, resp.). Aquinas distinguishes the three remaining forms of infused *cognitio* in this way:

Accordingly on the part of the things proposed to faith for belief, two things are requisite on our part. First, that they be penetrated or grasped by the intellect, and this pertains to the gift of understanding. Secondly, it is necessary that man should judge these things rightly, that he should esteem that he ought to adhere to these things, and to withdraw from their opposites. And this judgment, with regard to Divine things pertains to the gift of wisdom, but with regard to created things, pertains to the gift of knowledge, and as to its application to individual works, pertains to the gift of counsel. (II-II.8.6, resp.).

Matters of faith, Aquinas says, are divine and eternal, but faith itself “is something temporal in the mind of the believer” (II-II.9.2, rep. ob. 2). “Hence, to know what one ought to believe, pertains to the gift of knowledge, but to know in themselves the very things we believe, by a kind of union with them [*scire autem ipsas res creditas secundum seipsas per quendam unionem ad ipsas*], pertains to the gift of wisdom.” All these gifts, Aquinas says, are ordered to the perfection of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (II-II.9.1, rep. ob. 3). But “the gift of wisdom corresponds more to charity which unites man’s mind to God” (II-II.9.2, rep. ob. 1).

What Holy Church and Wille call “kynde knowynge” is then very like all four of these cognitive graces, and perhaps especially like what Aquinas calls “wisdom” or

*sapientia*.<sup>37</sup> So what have been the prospects for wisdom in Holy Church's teaching? In directing Wille's attention to the "mase," its fictions and fantasies, its characteristic modes of labor, play, and worship, its forms of governance, Holy Church has asked Wille to look both "out there" and "in here." Her teaching has been as much a call to self-knowledge as to keen discernment, and even pointed renunciation, regarding the ways of "this world." But she has not counseled withdrawal from the world. And neither has she sought to heal Wille's imprisoned gaze by way of a philosophical therapeutics of "eternyte." Asking Wille if he can see a particular place and people in "treuthe," she has used language that "points." She has gestured: toward *this* world, *this* people, a very particular *here* and now. And yet she further grounds her teaching about this particular world in an account of creation as divine gift. Correlatively, she implicates Wille in *this* world of gift, in a sense immeasurably more fundamental and decisive than she had suggested of his (nonetheless real and powerful) implication in the maze. Wille has everywhere worried that the "wey" to Truth might be beyond his ken. Holy Church has responded by sketching an alternative picture of Wille's powers in light of a good created order and his baptismal freedom from sin in Christ.

The particular terms in which Holy Church will go on to gloss this way make for perhaps the most striking set of associations in her teaching. As Passus I draws to a close, she takes up a fuller meditation on truth and love in light of Christ's incarnation and passion, and further provocatively links up the "myhte" of soul she has been drawing Wille's attention to with the peculiarly "myhtfull" figure of Christ on the cross. Holy

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<sup>37</sup> For a study of *kynde knowynge* as "wisdom" across the length of Langland's poem, see Sister Mary Clemente Davlin, O.P., "Kynde Knowynge as a Major Theme in *Piers Plowman* B," *Review of English Studies* 22.85 (1971): 1-19.

Church had narrated Wille's life in a world of divine gift that runs deeper than the most gripping "fantasies" and "tales" of the maze (Pr. 37, 49). Here, similarly, she grounds her account of Christ's judgment and crucifixion under earthly powers in a prior account of the outpouring of divine gift in healing love.

For Treuthe telleth that loue ys triacle to abate synne  
 And most souerayne salue for soule and for body.  
 Loue is the plonte of pees, most precious of vertues,  
 For heuene holde hit ne myghte, so heuy hit semede,  
 Til hit hadde of erthe ygoten hitsilue.  
 Was neuer lef vppon lynde [leaf upon linden-tree] lyhtere ther-aftur,  
 As when hit hadde of the folde [earth] flesch and blode taken.  
 Tho was hit portatif and persaunt [portable and piercing] as is the  
 poynt of a nelde [needle];  
 May non armure hit lette [hinder] ne none heye walles.  
 .....  
 And for to knowe hit [i.e., love] kyndly, hit comeseth by myhte,  
 And in the herte ther is the hed and the heye welle.  
 For of kynde knowynge of herte ther comseth a myhte  
 And that falleth to the fader that formede vs alle,  
 Lokede on vs with loue, let his sone deye  
 Mekeliche for oure mysdedes to amende vs alle.  
 And yut wolde he hem no wo that wrouhte hym al that tene [harm]  
 Bote mekeliche with mouth mercy he bysoughte  
 To haue pitee on that peple that paynede hym to dethe.  
 Here myhtow se ensaumples in hymself one  
 That he was myhtfull and meke, and mercy gan graunte  
 To hem that hengen hym hye and his herte thorlede [pierced].  
 (I.146-54, 159-70)

The love that heaven itself cannot hold, the great plant of peace heavy with healing life, becomes light, mobile, and even fragile like a leaf when it takes on flesh and blood. It lifts on the wind, and no high walls can keep it out. Likewise is incarnate love sharp and precise like the point of a needle, so that one might strain one's eyes even to see it. It pierces where even the heaviest armor is vulnerable. How then can Wille see it? More, how can he know it "kyndly"? Holy Church refers Wille to a "myhte" of his own heart given by the "myhte" of God. The "fader that formede vs alle," the giver of love and

knowledge, is then affiliated with the “sone” who dies meekly for our misdeeds, and who in turn wills “no wo” toward his judges and executioners but takes “pitee on that peple that paynede hym to dethe.” While incarnate love pierces like a needle when armored defenses are up, the justice of this “peple” clumsily pierces a naked and defenseless body with a literal soldier’s spear. For Holy Church, this scene is a discovery of one both “myhtfull and meke,” and thereby also an exposure of the pretensions of a justice before which this one stands condemned. It is in this light, on a chain of verbal associations, that Holy Church defines both divine and earthly power, as well as the powers of soul by which Wille might hope to know love and truth “kyndly.” Clearly Holy Church is not sketching an intuitionist picture of Wille’s natural powers of knowing, as if he (or anyone) simply had to look more steadily and deeply within to see all that she now explicitly proclaims. Yet, again, neither is she trampling the real integrity of Wille’s own capacity to know even this utterly counterintuitive, forgiving Christ “kyndly.” Holy Church rather provides a picture of the knowledge of faith that comes *ex auditu*, in the hearing of a proclaimed word; this knowledge is a gift Wille is capable of receiving.<sup>38</sup> In turn, the terms in which Holy Church presents the human potentiality for knowledge ask

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<sup>38</sup> In an account of Christian moral habituation in the corporate worship of the Church, Paul J. Griffiths construes listening as a mode of adoration: “attentive hearing is inextricable from confession and praise: confession of one’s own lack implies the necessity of instruction *ex auditu*, and impels the one who confesses to become a hearer; and praise for gift is the natural and proper response to the particular gift of the word heard.” One so habituated as a listener “becomes, against the grain, less prone to garrulous self-assertion and more prone to attention to what others say and do.” Perhaps Langland’s turn to Holy Church would seem, in this light, an odd way to begin a poem, which would seem to consist precisely in a kind of garrulousness. But it is in the particular forms of attention Holy Church recommends that I see an activation and formation of the poem’s exploratory work, itself constituted by highly attentive forms of poetic “speech.” See Griffiths, “Christians and the Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilander and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 398-412, at 406.

us to envision a cognitive “myhte” whose own truest activity is to be diffusive and self-giving.

Yet what express practical valence do Holy Church’s “ensaumples” have? Does she leave the justice of “that peple,” exposed in its presumptions by Christ’s pity and mercy, safely in the past? Does her peculiar account of power here have any bearing on the particular configurations of power in the world she has been teaching Wille to see? The poem, for example, has already offered up visions of power in very different terms, as in its description of those Roman cardinals who “power presumen in hemself a pope to make,” or as in the powerful “cat of a court” of the Prologue’s fable, who “playde with somme perilously and potte hem ther hym lykede” (Pr. 135, 170, 172). Even Holy Church’s own impressive descent from the castle of Truth, we must admit, seems thrown in a new light once she has described the way in which God in love has descended from heaven and displayed power in subjection to a Roman cross.<sup>39</sup> And again, even Holy Church’s own earlier account of truth and its defense by sanctioned forms of violence seems now to call for further exploration. Knights, she had insisted, “sholde nother faste ne forbere the serk [knigh’s undershirt] / But feithfullich fyghte and fende [defend] treuthe / And neuer leue [abandon] for loue in hope to lacche syluer” (I.99-101). As King David dubbed knights to serve truth, so God presides over a court of angels, “goddes

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Clemente Davlin sees a “corrected cosmology” in Holy Church’s teaching here, which presses back on and even revises the “dramatically different cosmology” of the Prologue and first half of Passus I. This first picture of the universe and God’s relation to it is “simple, clear and predictable, with an upper, middle, and lower register whose definite boundaries may be easily mapped. . . . God seems ‘other,’ distant, static, and majestic . . .” But in Holy Church’s later explication of an incarnational theology, “love breaks out of heaven and leaps to earth, so that God’s place in the universe appears unpredictable and mysterious. . . . God is free and dynamic, involved in middle earth, not simply in the upper register.” See Davlin, *The Place of God in “Piers Plowman” and Medieval Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 28.



knyghtes” (I.108). And yet “Treuthe” himself “telleth,” as Holy Church has gone on to say, “that loue ys triacle to abate synne”: love that puts up no apparent defenses, love whose “pees” cannot be founded in violence. Perhaps Holy Church’s own “cluster of ideas” is not itself, after all, so serenely “coherent.” In any case, she neither works out these oppositions in detail nor shies away from presenting them forthrightly. The Christ she proclaims to Wille is not safely cordoned off even from the rest of her own teaching.

Moreover, Holy Church does herself press these “ensaamples” to contemporary application. The vision of might and mercy she has related in Christ’s incarnation and passion has prompted her to issue a direct challenge to the “myhty” of Wille’s world.

Forthy Y rede [advise] yow riche, haueth reuthe vppon the pore;  
Thow ye be myhty to mote [argue, litigate], beth meke in youre  
werkes,  
For the same mesure that ye meteth, amis other elles [amiss or  
otherwise],  
Ye shal be weye [weighed] ther-with whenne ye wende [go] hennes.  
(I.171-74)

The epistle of James is woven throughout Holy Church's language, both here and in her subsequent remarks. She goes on to invoke James explicitly: "For Iames the gentele iugeth in his bokes / That fayth withouten feet is feblore then nautht / And as ded as a dore-nayl but yf the dedes folowe" (I.181-83; cf. James 2:17, 26). Her direct address to the rich, likewise, takes its starting point from James 5: "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl in your miseries, which shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted: and your garments are motheaten" (5:1-2, Douay-Rheims). The cries of laborers, James declares, whom the rich have defrauded of their rightful hire, have reached the ears of the Lord of the Sabbath (5:4). And here James seems to present a striking identification: "You have condemned and put to death the Just One, and he resisted you not" (5:6).

Langland's Holy Church has taken this passage as her text in a direct address to "yow riche," having been prompted by her own account of earthly "myhte" expressed in the condemnation of one who willed no woe and sought no retribution. She has not, then, left "that peple" and their justice tucked away in a distant and benign exemplarity. Here Holy Church further insists on the unity of the virtues: a life characterized by honesty, hard work, and chastity (or perhaps the presumptions thereof) is still enfeebled without love, justice, and generosity. Virtues not informed by charity are subject to judgment: "Chastity withouten charite worth [will be] cheyned in helle" (I.184). Just so Holy Church characterizes so many "men of holy chirche," who seem to gobble up what charity they might have had, as their chastity is coupled with gluttony and greed. Indeed, the most successful clergy seem especially ravenous: "Aren none hardore [more severe] ne hungriore then men of holy chirche, / Auerous and euel-willed when thei ben avaunsed" (I.187-88). Overwhelmed by covetousness, they seem to have been padlocked up, shut off from grace just as they refuse to give it (I.191-98). Holy Church's theme of truth as the best of "tresors" reaches a sobering antithesis in this picture of lives suffocatingly locked ("yhapsed") in treasure chests of their own making.

With this apparent turn back to the world of the maze, Wille, as Passus II opens, asks Holy Church to teach him "by sum craft to knowe the false" (II.4). Holy Church had undermined the powerful claims of the maze, as we have seen, with a countervailing account of creation and worship in response to God's good gifts. She went on to provide an account of God's redemptive love in Christ, and thereby to expose the pretensions of earthly justice to which Christ was subject. I have suggested in turn that the poem sets "that peple" and their justice alongside "this peple," Wille's own people, whom Holy

Church asks him to see and to see himself among. Drawing on the epistle of James, she has made an explicit link between these groups in addressing the “myhty,” “yow riche.” But not content to moralize from afar, Langland’s poem will now dramatize a rival to Holy Church, a powerful and deeply formative teacher in her own right. Perhaps if *Piers Plowman* had been rewritten by eighteenth-century political economists, we might have begun with the figure Langland calls Mede. She could have taught Wille about the egalitarian “pees” sure to be born from bracketing questions about the treasure of truth in favor of the more socially useful, if less messily “political,” pursuit of treasure itself. She could have unpacked the intricacies of political contract and told Wille stories about tacit consent (“thou oughtest me to knowe; / Y undirfenge the formeste and fre man the made”), Wille now having risen from vagrancy to property ownership. She could have helped Wille envision a “peple” whose judgment was itself happily immune from judgment insofar as judgment had been revealed as interest and appetite (i.e., “that the gott ascuth”) and as the market cannot lie.<sup>40</sup> For Langland’s poem, however, the powers of Mede seem to offer somewhat less hopeful prospects.

When Wille asks to “knowe the false,” Holy Church once more prompts him to look: “Loke vpon thy left half and loo where he standeth” (II.5). Wille sees a “womman . . . wonderly yclothed” whose rich array ravishes his heart (II.9, 16). Holy Church

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<sup>40</sup> For an insightful treatment of early liberal moral and political theory, see Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edition (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), ch. 9. “To the liberal economists acquisitiveness was not the natural, spontaneous instinct that their critics have thought, but a type of motivation to be acquired, or, better yet, instilled” (291). On “tacit” consent and property rights in Locke, see 279; on the substitution of “interest” for older nonconformist notions of conscience, see 297-307; and on liberal conscience and social conformity, see 307-14. For an outstanding treatment of judgment in Adam Smith, see too Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

describes this “womman” as having lied against Leute (Holy Church’s lover), slandering him before lords responsible for maintaining law; as contradicting Holy Church’s own teaching in the courts of kings; and as being equally “pryue” in the “popes palays” as Holy Church herself (II.20-24). One Fauel (Deceit) is her father and she is mannered like him: “*Talis pater, talis filia*” (II.27). Holy Church, by contrast, is a “ducchesse of heuene,” the dear daughter of the Son, “*filius dei*” (II.31-33). In this light, Holy Church declares the injustice of present arrangements: “Y ouhte ben herrore [higher] then [s]he, Y com of a bettere” (II.30). She then spells out the alternatives embodied in herself and her rival, playing on versions of “loue” and the “good” for which those who love strive:

what man me louyeth and my wille foleweth  
 Shal haue grace to good ynow and a good ende,  
 And what man Mede loueth, my lyf Y dar wedde [wager],  
 He shal lese for here loue a lippe [portion] of trewe charite. (II.34-37)

In the face of these alternatives Holy Church prepares (as we soon discover) to depart from Wille. Before she goes, she tells him that Mede is to be married tomorrow to “a mansed wrecche,” one Fals Faythlesse (II.43). Mede’s own father Fauel has “foule enchanted” his daughter toward this end (II.45).<sup>41</sup> As Wille will himself “aspye,” some will take great pleasure in seeing Mede marry Fals Faythlesse (II.48). Wille should know these people well and “kepe . . . fro hem alle” (II.49). Holy Church further counsels Wille not to reprove Mede’s boosters and hangers-on, but to wait to “pot forth” his “resoun” till “Leutee be justice / And haue power to punyshe hem” (II.51-52). Once

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<sup>41</sup> In this way Mede, having been so “enchanted,” is a somewhat equivocal figure. A figure called Theology later points out that Mede has a legitimate lineage and is “a moylore, a mayden of gode”; one Amendes (Reparation) is her mother (II.148, 123). Mede has been rightly pledged in marriage to Truth, not False. For a powerful reading of the Mede episode, see Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), ch. 2.

more this seems hardly a defense of the status quo from Holy Church, but rather an acknowledgment that, at present, “power” is not given to listen to “resoun.”

And so Holy Church leaves Wille in some measure on the defensive. She had affirmed his powers; now she cautions him that they are immune neither from mistake nor from manipulation. Indeed, the poem has only begun to expose the individual and collective forms of sin that enchain the will, baffle self-reflection, and systematically disfigure love of God and neighbor — forms of sin from which the baptized Christian is not immune. Likewise has the poem only begun to explore the means and mediations of God’s grace in Christ by which people might continually participate in their own healing.<sup>42</sup>

Conviction itself, Holy Church now insists, is vulnerable to distortion, and consent is but one term among many in considerations of justice. Wille should be wary lest the very principle of vision Holy Church has tried to tease out, affirm, and inform be obscured or grow dumb to further teaching and conversion. “‘For Y bykenne the [entrust or commend you to] Crist,’ quod she, ‘and his clene moder, / And acombre [burden, overwhelm, baffle] thow neuere thy consience for coueityse of mede’” (II.53-54). Holy Church has already cautioned Wille that political “power” is not now given to heed the voice of reason, what here she calls the voice of “consience.” She therefore leaves Wille and Langland’s poem not only with a rich body of instruction, but also with a pressing

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<sup>42</sup> For treatment of *Piers*’s various and profound grapplings with the nature and consequences of sin as well as the healing the poem shows to be effected in Christ, see David Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), ch. 4. Holy Church’s “affirmation” of Wille’s powers, as I have put it, makes for an important moment in the poem; but she has carefully named those powers as gifts, not autonomous possessions, and the poem likewise still has much more to say about the “mase” she introduces and the chains of sin in which human powers are all too easily and inertly caught up.

question: about the kind of polity in which “conscience,” its vision and voice, might be sustained and heard.

### **Envisioning the “Comune” Good: Conscience, Pentecost, and the Politics of Truth**

After Holy Church leaves Wille as a speaking presence, the poem sets out in a range of directions. As we have seen, Holy Church provides Wille with an account of God as creator, one worthy of “worschipe.” She goes on to supplement this account with a narration of God as redeemer in the incarnation, life, and death of Christ, a narration in the light of which she casts both Wille’s powers of knowing and prominent powers in Wille’s world. Furthermore, Holy Church insists on a distinction between herself and “this world”: this distinction proves complex in its outworking, but it provides a foundational principle for the kind of vision in which Holy Church attempts to instruct Wille. Holy Church’s own presence in, or absence from, the Prologue’s busy field of folk is left as a matter for discernment. Yet all this teaching notwithstanding, the way remains open for much further instruction. Holy Church does not teach Wille, for example, about Christ’s resurrection and ascension. What she says about atonement and eschatology is sparse and highly compressed. Neither, remarkably, does she account for her own peculiar genesis, the apostolic form of community and its native tongue in the Spirit with which Holy Church must presumably claim continuity. Holy Church has no account, that is, of Pentecost.

In this section, I turn to the final two passus of *Piers Plowman*, where the poem does supply such an account. Articulation of the Church’s birth at Pentecost is here given to the figure Conscience. Conscience ends up, moreover, enveloped in his own account

as actor and not simply as narrator. The liturgical setting for this telling of the Pentecost story likewise makes Wille himself a participant and not simply a viewer. When Wille sees the *Spiritus paraclitus* appear like lightning in a Pentecostal vision, following Conscience he kneels and together they sing the hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus* (XXI.209-12).<sup>43</sup> This becomes yet another supplement to the poem's account of right "worschipe" (XXI.210). In turning to these last passus in *Piers*, accordingly, I hope to keep in view the poem's representation of "treuthe" and its politics. There is, in my view, no large-scale "dispensation of Truthe" in Langland's poem that is superceded by a "dispensation of Christ."<sup>44</sup> Holy Church utters one of the poem's most moving Christological orations on love and forgiveness as a constituent part of her teaching on "treuthe." Correlatively,

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<sup>43</sup> Raymond St.-Jacques has studied the final passus of *Piers Plowman* in their liturgical context and dimensions, finding special relevance in the liturgies of Pentecost and Advent, in "Conscience's Final Pilgrimage in *Piers Plowman* and the Cyclical Structure of the Liturgy," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 40 (1970): 210-23. See also Michael Cornett's fascinating exploration of the "form of confession" for laypeople found in British Library, Harley 6041 (folios 97r-102v) in his recent dissertation, "Form of Confession," (cited above, n. 13), at 158-95. This form of confession follows a composite A- and C-text of *Piers Plowman*, copied around 1425, in the Harley manuscript; the two texts are the only ones in the manuscript and were copied by the same scribal hand. The Harley form of confession enjoins its reader to "sey with grete deuocioun and with contricioun of herte" the *Veni Creator Spiritus* hymn, which is accordingly copied out in full in Latin. Cornett points out that "[t]his use of the hymn as an act of devotion for preparing to confess is unique among Middle English forms of confession, but the appearance of *Veni Creator* is not unique within the Harley manuscript, for just twelve folios earlier it is sung on Pentecost in a scene from *Piers Plowman*" (161-62). Cornett accordingly entertains the possibility that this text is placed in the Harley manuscript immediately after *Piers* "as a readerly response to the poem in the face of the kind of world that *Piers* leaves us with, one in which Conscience wanders looking for help" (199; and see more fully Cornett's conclusion, "Pentecostal Vision," 196-204).

<sup>44</sup> These phrases, which correspond to fuller readings he gives elsewhere, appear in James Simpson's essay, "'After Craftes Conseil clotheth yow and fede': Langland and London City Politics," in *England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1991 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. N. Rogers (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1993), 109-27, at 114. This is a fascinating and extremely suggestive essay that attempts to situate Langland's depiction of Pentecost alongside contemporary fraternal and craft guild politics in late fourteenth-century London. The grand dispensationalist schematic Simpson sees in *Piers* and which he articulates here and elsewhere is, however, not persuasive.

we find that “puyr treuthe” remains central to the poem’s exploration of love, justice, and community in its final passus. Accounts of the poem that stress a clear movement from hierarchy, strict forms of justice, and rationality to fraternalism, charity, and the affections tend to downplay or overlook these presences. I would therefore expand on James Simpson’s account of Langland’s “problematic for satire.” This is not only about the tempering of satiric judgment in the light of God’s patience before human sin. It is also about the social conditions that might make possible — as well as those that might threaten — the recognition of “treuthe” in the first place. Appropriately enough, it turns out that Holy Church’s self-articulation *requires* more voices than one. Indeed, this is an ongoing articulation for the poem that requires a proliferation of voices. In Langland’s presentation of Pentecost, he presses questions about the recognition and voicing of truth, revisiting and revising earlier versions of these considerations in his poem. He does so expressly, however, as an inquiry into “treuthe” in its relationship to “Vnite,” a name the poem now gives to “Holy Chirche” (XXI.328). The poem’s final passus make, then, for a drama about the conditions of catholicity: holy, catholic, and apostolic. Simultaneously, they track the fate of the Church’s political witness. This is a witness given voice and dramatic agency in the figure Langland calls Conscience.

If Holy Church leaves unanswered the question we might have most expected her to address — namely, the question of her own identity, historical and contemporary — this is nonetheless a question her teaching has itself prompted at every turn. Christ’s incarnation, Wille’s status as an embodied soul, his baptismal identity, worship not as private affect but as practical faithfulness: all these teachings would tend to affirm the indispensably and necessarily visible character of the Church, its existence as a



determinate social body. Despite the authoritative voice we hear as “Holy Church,” however, the poem has yet to imagine such ecclesial determinations. It has given us what Holy Church teaches about love and truth, and has likewise established a way of knowing that begins in trust and acknowledged dependence rather than simple intuition, introspection, or forms of suspicion either rationalist or voluntarist. But it remains for the poem to show at greater length how the Church as a social body is itself necessary for truthfully knowing love and for loving truth. Holy Church does not give Wille, for example, a concrete vision of the practices that could sustain such a social life in continuity with and discipleship to the Christ whose incarnation, life, and death she has narrated. Likewise, though she recalls Wille to his own baptism and formation in her care, what it is to “knowe” Holy Church and the truth she proclaims will necessarily involve more histories than Wille’s own (l.72). In this respect James Simpson is right to assert that for Holy Church “theology and ‘sociology’ are not discrepant”: this, I would add, is true for Langland’s poem as a whole. Theologizing divorced from the particular forms of life and the particular social practices that it claims to elucidate and inform is surely a sign of intellectual and moral failure in *Piers Plowman* — as Langland’s caustic depiction of the bloated pontifications of the doctor of divinity on the Trinity and “Dowel” in Passus XV might, for example, attest. However, the crucial point remains that Holy Church is far from determinative on what this “sociology” is to be.

A central figure in whom the poem seeks to represent such a sociology is Piers the plowman. Though I cannot claim to do justice here to Langland’s various representations of Piers across the poem, it is worth taking note of him since both his presence and his absence are important features of the poem’s final two passus. An agricultural laborer

who claims to know truth “as kyndely as clerk doth his bokes,” Piers crosses boundaries between literal and allegorical representation (VII.183). He is a figure in whom Langland insists that the articulation and recognition of truth cannot depend simply on a professional class of clerics. If amidst reformist initiatives in the wake of Lateran IV and growing Church and civil bureaucracies Langland saw a creeping ideology of expertise, he resisted it and sought to articulate an alternative vision in Piers.<sup>45</sup> For Piers is not simply a voiceless icon of the poem’s solidarity with the third estate. He is given an authoritative teaching role in the poem and also, remarkably, an imagined position of secular power in which he *fails* to do rightly by his fellow laborers under the terms of contemporary labor legislation, even as he belatedly recalls what Truth has taught him: to see these fellows as his “bloody bretherne, for god bouhte vs alle” (VIII.216). Langland refuses to sentimentalize Piers while giving him a growing and central authority in his poem’s theology and politics. Piers becomes a prominent representative of human nature in the poem, so that in one of its formulations of the incarnation, by Faith or Abraham, Christ is said to “iouste in Pers armes, / In his helm and in his haberion [coat of mail], *humana natura*” (XX.21-22). Piers figures the frailties and limitations of human nature that Christ takes up in the incarnation, just as he comes increasingly to figure the redeemed humanity displayed in Christ.

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<sup>45</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre has written on the “epistemological self-righteousness” to which positivist social scientists and revolutionaries alike are prone insofar as they share an ideology of expertise that presumes deliverance from the epistemological limitations of ordinary agents — i.e., insofar as they have forgotten that they themselves remain such agents. “The ideology of expertise,” MacIntyre writes, “embodies a claim to privilege with respect to power”: perhaps in Langland’s plowman we find, among other things, an imagined recentering of ordinary agency, in the light of which any such “privileges,” whether civil or ecclesiastical, should be evaluated. See MacIntyre, “Ideology, Social Science, and Revolution,” *Comparative Politics* 5.3 (1973): 321-42 (here at 342).

Late in the poem Piers accordingly becomes a figure of St. Peter, vicar of Christ on earth, given the powers to bind and loose in the Church and to grant Christ's pardon to sinners. Piers is envisioned in a biblical and apostolic milieu, as one to whom the *Spiritus paraclitus* is given at Pentecost (XXI.200-201; Acts 2:1-13). Here Langland combines an allegory of the division of graces in the Church drawing on 1 Corinthians 12 with a farmer's allegory of the founding of the Church and its missional vocation with Piers in the most prominent position of leadership. Grace, in a moment we shall consider more closely below, first prompts Conscience and Piers to summon the "comune" for a division of gifts, "Tresor to lyue by to here lyues ende / And wepne to fihte with that wol neuer fayle" (XXI.217-18). Echoing Holy Church's final words to Conscience, Grace explains why these treasures must also be construed as weapons: "For Auntecrist and hise al the world shal greue / And acombre the, Consience, bote yf Crist the helpe" (XXI.219-20; cf. II.53-54). False prophets, Grace warns, will come and exercise power over kings and earls; pride will be pope, with covetousness and unkindness as his cardinals. So to "vch man" grace is given in the form of practical knowledge and skill, "to gye with hym suluen": that is, that each might have resources of competence, self-reliance, and dignity so as to earn a livelihood in the world in accordance with "treuthe" (XXI.227-28, 229). By the Spirit's power, such self-reliance is apparently able to be integrated into a peaceful community of "yefte," not self-assertion (XXI.253). Grace's dispersal of gifts here echoes Holy Church's insistence on truth as itself among the things of which humans are "nidefole." Grace then prompts the "comune" to crown Conscience "kyng" and make Craft their steward (XXI.256). Confirming and enlarging upon the act of the risen Christ at XXI.182-90, Grace himself now makes Piers "procuratour," reeve, keeper

of the penitential register *Redde quod debes*, and leader of a “teme” as plowman of truth.<sup>46</sup> To Piers Grace accordingly gives four “grete oxen” for his plow: the evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all joined to John, “most gentill of all / The pris neet of Peres plouh, passynge alle othere” (XXI.262-66). Likewise is Piers given four draught horses in the doctors of the Church — Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory, and Jerome — who draw the harrows of the Old and New Testaments. Next Grace gives Piers “graynes, cardinales vertues” for sowing in human souls: *Spiritus prudencie*, *Spiritus temperancie*, *Spiritus fortitudinis*, and *Spiritus iusticie* (XXI.274-308). Piers sows these seeds and then harrows the ground once more with the old law and the new law, so that at last “loue” might grow from these virtues and destroy the weeds of vice (XXI.309-11). Piers announces that the Church’s work is given to “alle that conneth kynde wit,” that is, all able Christians (XXI.315). These are all called to follow the counsel of the Church’s four doctors and to cultivate the virtues. Here Grace gives Piers further gifts for the building of a “hous” or barn for his harvest, a structure that Grace calls “Vnite, Holy Chirche an Englisch”: a mortar made from Christ’s baptism and blood, which makes for a “goode foundement,” wooden slatting of Christ’s pains in the passion, and a roof made of Holy Writ (XXI.321-28). Grace then devises a “cart” called Cristendoem for carrying home Piers’s harvest, as well as two horses to pull it, Contrissioun and Confessioun. Finally, “presthoed” is made Piers’s “hayward” or hedge-warden, while Grace and Piers set off on

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<sup>46</sup> Piers is thus given several titles at this point: *procuratour* (agent with “power of attorney”), *reue* (manager of an estate below a steward), *registrer* (keeper of a register, as in a clerk who keeps receipts in an ecclesiastical court or the keeper of a bishop’s register of licensed clergy), *prowour* (one who procures supplies and provisions), and *plouhman*. For discussion of these terms, see Stephen A. Barney, *The Penn Commentary on “Piers Plowman”, Volume 5: C Passus 20-22; B Passus 18-20* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 146-48. For the playing out of these roles across this passage more generally, see the full commentary at 146-58.

mission: “As wyde as the world is . . . to tulye treuthe / And the londe of bileue, the lawe of holi churche” (XXI.333-34). There seems a structural ambiguity in these lines, an ambiguity the poem will have more to say about. For is the “wyde . . . world” here the equivalent of the “londe of bileue,” so that Piers and Grace are tilling truth in the lands of what we might call (Western) Christendom? In this way, truth would be equivalent to the “lawe of holi churche.” Or is truth being tilled in the wide world beyond the “londe of bileue,” while the “lawe of holi churche” is being tilled at home? What is most remarkable for my purposes at this point is that just as soon as Piers assumes this apostolic role as leader of the Church, he is said to be “to the plouh” and disappears from the poem as an actor in his own right (XXI.335).

In this way Langland’s poem does not treat Piers’s presence or authority, even at this high water mark, as its resolution to the problems it has addressed and the questions it has raised. Langland’s poem does not therefore move in any straightforward way from the teaching authority of Holy Church to that of Piers, as though Piers simply supplies what Holy Church cannot. Wille’s early claim in Passus I to lack “kynde” knowledge, for example, might have opened out into a critique of Holy Church in which Piers could have played a climactic role. The shorter alliterative poem *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede* is structured in terms of such a conceit. The poem’s narrator says he knows his ABCs, his Pater Noster, and even his Ave Maria (“almost to the ende”), but he laments, “all my kare is to comen for y can nohght my Crede” (8).<sup>47</sup> When he shows up for confession his priest will surely require penance of him on account of his ignorance. Moreover, Jesus himself has indeed called for explicit belief: “He that leeueth nought on

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<sup>47</sup> For this poem see Helen Barr, ed., *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 60-97.

me he leseth the blisse" (15). Yet how can the poem's troubled speaker know what he has not been taught? He sets out in search of anyone, whether "lewed or lered," who might both teach him his Creed and prove to live faithfully as he teaches (18). The narrator turns immediately to the friars, but in a series of exchanges with dubious and mutually backbiting representatives of the fraternal orders, he is continually disappointed. Things finally reach a turning point when the narrator finds a humble plowman, dressed in ragged clothes and laboring with his wife, barefoot and bleeding, in a muddy field. This plowman called Peres confirms the narrator in his misgivings about the friars, and proves the faithful teacher he had set out to find. The poem ends with the plowman's recitation of a vernacular Creed.

By contrast, Langland's poem does not end either with Piers's first speaking appearance in Passus VII, in which he provides a group of penitents with a set of allegorical directions on the "way" to Truth; or with his empowering by the risen Christ to "assoyle of alle manere synnes" those who faithfully pay back what they owe, "*Redde quod debes*," in Passus XXI.<sup>48</sup> The poem does not end when it shows this petrine Piers receiving from Grace, as we have seen, the gifts of scripture, theological learning, the infused cardinal virtues all ordered to "loue," the great "hous" or barn for truth's harvest, "Vnite," and the sacrament of penance.<sup>49</sup> Instead, just as soon as we witness this

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<sup>48</sup> For a seminal study of the resources of Piers's map, see Elizabeth Zeeman (Salter), "Piers Plowman and the Pilgrimage to Truth," *Essays and Studies* n.s. 11 (1958): 1-16. And for an illuminating account of what resources remain lacking in Piers's instruction here, lacks which the poem will go on to highlight and correct, see David Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, ch. 4.

<sup>49</sup> For the poem's treatment of the cardinal virtues in its final passus, see David Aers, "Langland on the Church and the End of the Cardinal Virtues," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 42.1 (2012): 59-81. Aers affirms Morton Bloomfield's judgment that these virtues are the infused cardinal virtues: "Langland is trying to imagine the making of citizens of the city of God living in history. The teleology here is a harvest beyond the happiness of natural

pentecostal infusion of gifts, we see Pride gather a host to attack the Church, whose leader is now Conscience. Not for the first time in the poem, Piers has disappeared; here we know only that he remains somewhere in the wide world with Grace “to tulye treuthe.”

By the poem’s end, then, it is a middling figure of sorts, an authority between authorities, Conscience, who plays the leading role next to Wille in the poem’s dramatic action. It is therefore to Conscience especially that I will look in what follows. *Piers* gives us several figures whose teaching authority retains a high status. Formally, however, it refuses to end with such teaching, as though the practical problems of interpretation, prudential action, or collective life could be solved by authoritative utterance, however brilliant and attractive. In this way, Conscience becomes a representative figure of the poem’s continual grappling with the hermeneutical dimensions of vision, over and above what seem its immediate insights. Conscience is also a resonant, wide-ranging figure in the poem, rare in that he appears early (Pr., III-V), reappears (XV), and is called upon by Wille himself at the opening of Passus XXI, after which he will remain a speaking presence to the poem’s final line.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, while

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man in the earthly city, a harvest enabled by Christ’s incarnation” (62). As Aers insists, however, Langland’s imaginative probing of the challenges facing such a virtuous citizenship in his own time show these to be profoundly dark, extending to transformations in the very language in which the virtues are themselves constituted and deployed.

<sup>50</sup> For one treatment of Conscience across the poem, which explores his “accretive” resonance, see Mary (Carruthers) Schroeder, “The Character of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*,” *Studies in Philology* 67.1 (1970): 13-30. While I take it to be unnecessarily limiting to assimilate Conscience to notions of “character” that look for his “education” in the course of the poem, Carruthers does insist that “Conscience has come to mean something very complex during the course of *Piers Plowman*, and the way in which Langland makes his various meanings interact and illuminate each other is masterly” (29). Still, to look for the education of this figure as a key to his meaning throughout is to subordinate the poem’s own complex and multiform shifts in time, place, and dialogic community to a narrative of individual development. I take Conscience to be distinct in important ways from, for example, Wille or even Piers in this respect. On such a

Conscience's authority does have a "middling" character as I have suggested, Langland depicts his relationship to figures like Holy Church and Piers as mutually informing. So while, as we have seen, it is Holy Church who first teaches Wille about "consience" in the face of Mede (II.54), when we see the Church under siege by the forces of Antichrist in Passus XXII, Conscience and his beleaguered "company" are themselves named as the "techares" of "holy kirke" (XXII.120). Similarly, while Piers comes to have an undeniably central authority in the poem, and while Conscience sets off on pilgrimage after Piers at the poem's end, Piers has first been introduced to us as one who knows the way to Truth because Conscience and Kynde Wyt taught it to him (VII.184). Wille himself can approach Conscience, on the one hand, in a posture of self-justificatory assertiveness: "For in my consience Y knowe what Crist wolde Y wrouhte [wishes me to do]"; as well as, on the other, earnest confession: "and so Y beknowe [acknowledge] / That Y haue ytynt [wasted] tyme and tyme myspened," as he says in response to Conscience's rebuke (V.83, 92-93). In Passus II, rising to speak in defense of Mede's more genuine lineage and in denunciation of her corrupters, Theology invokes "Consience" as an intimate of Truth's "consayl" who "knoweth yow alle" (II.155). "And yf he fynde yow in defaute and with the fals holde / Hit shall sitte [afflict, beset] youre

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psychologizing reading of Conscience, action in Langland's allegory tends to be explained in terms of the apparently characteristic strengths and weaknesses of a "distinct consciousness and awareness" to the exclusion of a pressing range of interpretive issues. So, for example, Carruthers argues that it is a long-visible "liability" of Conscience's personality, a courteous "conscientiousness," that explains and makes poignant his decisive welcoming of Friar Flatterer into Unity, the Church, in Passus XXII (XX in the B-text, which Carruthers focuses on). This still leaves to one side the vast institutional, historical, and theological concerns on harrowing display in and around this particular moment in Langland's poem. For an account of characterization in the poem that sees character as a way *in* to such broader social issues, however, see Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character*. Fowler herself refers to Conscience as a "character."



soules ful sore at the laste” (II.156-57). Conscience is here depicted as one by whose counsel Truth is made “witty” of human deeds and hearts. In Passus XVI, Liberum Arbitrium, who describes himself as rational appetite, “a will with a resoun,” also claims to act as Conscience (XVI.177). “And when Y chalenge or chalenge nat, chepe [bargain, dicker, offer to buy or sell] or refuse, / Thenne am Y Conscience ycald, goddess clerk and his notarie” (XVI.191-92). The interpretive dimensions of Conscience remain even here, since Conscience’s “challenges” must be discerned, applied, and followed through on by fallible human agents. Conscience is God’s notary and Truth a perfectly “witty” interpreter of what Conscience tells him: but for human beings, on Langland’s account, Conscience is an imperfect reader of his own handwriting.

Langland’s figure Conscience, along with figures like Reason and Kind Wit, has often been glossed by way of the vocabulary of scholastic theology, especially that of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>51</sup> I find the comparison between Langland’s Conscience and Aquinas’s *conscientia*, at least, apt and insightful, though previous studies have not given expression to the full range of significance *conscientia* takes on in Aquinas’s thought. Aquinas deals with conscience in different settings, but primarily as a component in the

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Gerald Morgan, “The Meaning of Kind Wit, Conscience, and Reason in the First Vision of *Piers Plowman*,” *Modern Philology* 84.4 (1987): 351-58; and Charles W. Whitworth, Jr., “Changes in the Roles of Reason and Conscience in the Revisions of *Piers Plowman*,” *Notes and Queries* 217, n.s. 19 (1972): 4-7. Carruthers also suggests scholastic parallels in her “Character of Conscience,” at 14-16. See too Morton Bloomfield’s appendix on Conscience in his “*Piers Plowman*” as a *Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, where he finds marked scholastic parallels (such that he takes the character Conscience to be an important indicator of Langland’s familiarity with academic theology more generally) but judges that Langland pushes Conscience toward more mystical, social, and apocalyptic resonances more characteristic, Bloomfield argues, of monastic conceptions.

broader structure of his account of human action.<sup>52</sup> For Aquinas, conscience is an act of the practical reason, the application of knowledge to action. Aquinas notes that, like human thought more generally, the judgment that is conscience can be forward-looking or backward-looking. He takes note of ordinary ways of talking about conscience and its applications. “For conscience,” he writes, “is said to witness, to bind, or incite, and also to accuse, torment, or rebuke” (I.79.13, resp.). Accordingly, when conscience judges of past action (including the action of inaction), it “witnesses.” When it sees that something has been done well or badly, it “excuses,” “accuses,” or “torments.” When conscience judges of what should or should not be done, it “incites” or “binds.” In general terms, Aquinas both affords a fundamental authority to conscience and is wary of seeing it as an illuminated power in its own right. Conscience needs information, just as it needs formation — in the virtues, the gifts of the Spirit, and in relationship with others. Contending with remarks from Origen, Aquinas indeed denies that conscience is a power of the soul. As Origen puts it in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, conscience “rebukes and convicts the soul to which it cleaves” and “functions like a pedagogue to the soul, a guide and companion, as it were, so that it might admonish it concerning better things or correct and convict it of faults.” “I perceive such great freedom here,” Origen writes, “that indeed [conscience] is constantly rejoicing and exulting in good works but is never convicted of evil deeds.” Origen calls conscience a “spirit,” associating it with that spirit within that the apostle Paul refers to in 1

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<sup>52</sup> For the central treatments in Aquinas, see *S.T.* I.79.12-13; I-II.19.5-6; I-II.94.6; and I-II.96.4. See also *De Veritate*, qq. 16-17. For overviews of the medieval discussions, see the various works referred to in n. 36 above.

Corinthians 2:11-12, by way of analogy to the Spirit of God.<sup>53</sup> Aquinas responds by construing “spirit” as “mind,” so that conscience is understood as “a certain pronouncement of the mind” (I.79.13, rep. ob. 1). Such pronouncements remain, nevertheless, binding insofar as they constitute the best judgment we have. Aquinas envisages situations, both ecclesiastical and civil, in which conscientious disobedience might be blameless and indeed positively called for (see *De Ver.* 17.5; and *S.T.* 96.4, II-II.104.5, respectively).

Yet he also insists that conscience can be and often is wrong in substance or application, or both, *despite* our responsibility, nevertheless, to heed it. Our conscience binds us but, depending on its rightness or wrongness and our level of ignorance, it may not excuse us (I-II.19.5-6). Appealing to what had become a traditional distinction between *conscientia* and *synderesis*, Aquinas argues that while a basic natural orientation to the good (i.e., the first principles of practical reason and the natural law, given us in *synderesis*) cannot be erased from the human heart, bad habits, bad company, bad customs, faulty reasoning, ignorance, and wayward passions can all lead one’s conscience astray (cf. I-II.94.6). Indeed, as leading potentially to both good and ill, Aquinas sees conscience in fundamentally social terms. As Augustine had written of his deeply puzzling, apparently frivolous but in retrospect all too significant theft of pears as

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<sup>53</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 103 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), book 2, chapter 9, pp. 132-33. On Origen, see the rich discussion in Henri de Lubac, “Tripartite Anthropology,” in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), part II, pp. 117-200 (on conscience and *pneuma* in Origen, see especially 139-41).

an adolescent: “alone I would never have done it.”<sup>54</sup> More fundamentally still, given his account of evil as a privation of the good, Augustine presses this point in its positive form by way of a question: how could the city of God “attain its appointed goal, if the life of the saints were not social?”<sup>55</sup> For Aquinas, likewise, the virtues that would inform or deform moral knowledge and its judgment in conscience are always socially embodied and articulated.<sup>56</sup>

Correspondingly, at the beginning of Passus XXI, when Wille falls asleep at the offertory in “myddes of the masse,” it is into what will prove to be a highly social dramatic scene that he calls Conscience for his instruction (XXI.4). Wille had reported in Passus I that Holy Church came down from the castle of Truth and “calde me by name” (I.4). Here, at the opening of Passus XXI, it is Wille who now takes the initiative. He tells us that he “calde . . . Conscience to kenne me the sothe” about the body he now sees

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<sup>54</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.8.16, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 19.5, p. 858.

<sup>56</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre has insightfully explored the ways in which Aquinas views the social and indeed inevitably culturally specific dimensions of conscience in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, repr. 2003), especially ch. 11 and pp. 330-31. Aquinas’s views, MacIntyre argues, put him at odds with accounts of conscience dependent on Enlightenment epistemologies that look for an underlying uniformity in basic moral principles across the wide range of human cultures and histories. While such views display a superficial similarity to Aquinas’s account of the natural law, they do not allow for what Aquinas does: widespread moral error. Likewise they do not seek, with Aquinas, vindication and display of the content of these basic moral principles, and an authority on how to discriminate them, in the virtuous person whose *prudentia* has guided him or her toward a life constitutive of the human *telos* or *ultimus finis*. Relying on a Baconian inductivist approach to the study of human culture, such views tend instead to “lose more and more of their specificity” regarding basic human morality “and turn out in the end to enjoin whatever in any culture people in the circumstances of that culture generally do.”

before him at Mass, appearing at once like Piers the Plowman and Jesus the Joustier, whose triumphant work the poem has just spent several passus depicting (XXI.9).

Y ful eftesones aslepe and sodeynliche me mette [dreamt]  
That Peres the plouman was peynted al bloody  
And cam in with a cros bfore the comune peple  
And riht lyke in alle lymes to oure lord Iesu.  
And thenne calde Y Consience to kenne me the sothe [teach me the  
truth]:  
“Is this Iesus the ioustare,” quod Y, “that Iewes dede to dethe?  
Or hit is Peres the plouhman? who paynted hym so rede?” (XXI.5-11)

In his first question, Wille neglects to mention Roman power in the death of “Iesus the ioustare,” so that he imputes to an undifferentiated body of “Iewes” exclusive agency. To this extent the “comune peple” before whom this body with his cross appears in a now liturgical context, a “peple” including Wille himself, are protected from self-reflection. In this way, Wille also neglects the lines Holy Church had herself been willing to draw in describing the “pitee” the “sone” had expressed on the cross toward “that peple that paynede hym to dethe” (I.166). This “peple,” an apparently inclusive category that Holy Church does not collapse into a body of “Iewes,” she immediately associates, as we have seen, with the “myhty” of Wille’s own world. Wille here also neglects the contexts established in Passus XX, where Pilate’s presumptions in judging life and death, as well as those of the “peple” who surround and influence him, clearly figure in Jesus’ triumph over the demonic powers in his harrowing of hell. “Thenne cam Pilatus *with moche peple* . . . The Iewes *and* the iustice [i.e., Pilate] ayeyns Jesus they were, / And *alle the court* on hym cryede ‘*Crucifige!*’ loude” (XX.35, 37-38, my emphasis). Yet Wille does finally leave open a question about agency in his puzzlement over what appears to be a “bloody” Piers: “who paynted hym so rede?”

In his reply, Conscience in part reiterates and expands on the terms of Wille's first question. In the account of Christ's life he gives, it is "Cayphas" and "other Iewes" who enviously scheme at Christ's death till finally they "culden hym on cros-wyse at Caluarie on a Fryday" (XXI.140-42). Similarly, while Jews who had been "gentel men" once despised Jesus and his teaching, "now are they lowe cherles" the world over (XXI.34-35). By contrast, "tho that bycome cristene bi consail of the Baptist / Aren frankeleynes and fre men . . . / And ientel men with Iesu" (XXI.38-40). Conscience blithely neglects Paul's teaching in Romans 9-11 concerning God's abiding election of Israel and promise to Abraham, a promise in which Christians participate. Wille's Conscience seems not to have taken account of Paul's:

I am speaking the truth in Christ — I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit — I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. It is not as though the word of God had failed. . . . I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! (Romans 9:1-6, 11:1, New Revised Standard Version)<sup>57</sup>

Yet if Conscience has neglected Paul's teaching in this respect, he does not go on to proclaim an unJewish Jesus, nor one who does not heal the sick, comfort the "carefole,"

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<sup>57</sup> For an important revisionist reading of Paul's view of conscience, see Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *The Harvard Theological Review* 56.3 (1963): 199-215, repr. in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1976), 78-96. For a reading of these Pauline contexts that extends to an account of the Church's political vocation as a participation in Israel's prior political vocation, see Daniel M. Bell, Jr., "Jesus, the Jews, and the Politics of God's Justice," *Ex Auditu* 22 (2006): 87-111. As Bell points out, Paul's line of questioning leads him to wonder if Israel's prior election actually displaces the Church: Paul's questions are rendered unintelligible on supersessionist accounts of the Church's vocation that presume Israel is rather displaced and forgotten.

and teach us “to louye oure enemyes” (XXI.46-47, 130, 127, 114).

Indeed, it is precisely by way of a sustained narration of this very Jewish identity that Conscience affirms Jesus as a “souereyn” king (XXI.76). Conscience initially responds to Wille’s question about the mysterious figure before him by telling him that while these are “Peres armes” in which the figure appears, “he that cometh so blody / Is Crist with his croes, conqueror of cristene” (XXI.12-14). Wille wonders in turn why Conscience speaks of “Crist” rather than “Iesu or Iesus” (XXI.25). Conscience takes this question as opportunity to gloss these names with reference to Christ’s status as “knyht,” “kyng,” and “conquerour.” As “kyng of Iewes,” Conscience says, Jesus “iustified and tauhte hem / The lawe of lyf that laste shal euere / And fended hem [protected them] fro foule eueles, feueres and fluxes / And fro fendes that in hem was and false bileue” (XXI.44-47). Thus “was he Iesu of Iewes cald, gentel profete, / And kyng of here kyngdoem and croune baer of thornes” (XXI.48-49). On the cross, this Jewish king was likewise a conqueror, vanquishing death and ravishing hell (XXI.50-62). Born in Bethlehem, Christ is “knowleched” as “souereyn” by angels in heaven as well as by “thre kynges” on earth (XXI.74-82). In the guise of frankincense, gold, and myrrh, these kings or “wyse men” come bearing gifts: “resoun,” “rihtwisnesse,” and “pyte,” respectively (XXI.86-95). Conscience stresses that this young king learns to be a conqueror, developing and growing in “the manere of a man” till “he hadde all hem that he fore bledde” (XXI.96-107). This development involves formation in Jewish tradition, practices, and history, as when at a “Iewene feste” Jesus turns water into wine (XXI.108). Here Conscience superimposes another triad on his narration of Jesus’ life, that of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. At Cana, Jesus begins to “do wel” (XXI.116). When he feeds the

five thousand, he assumes a “grettere name,” Dobet (XXI.128-29). At this point the “comune peple” begin to see Jesus in terms of Israel’s history, as “*fili David, Iesus*” (XXI.133). No man, these people believe, is “so worthy / To be cayser or kyng of the kyngdoem of Iuda / Ne ouer Iewes iustice as Iesus” (XXI.138-39).

It is this political significance and admiration that prompts Caiphas’s “enuye” and his seeking Jesus’ judgment and execution (XXI.140). Caiphas and his cohort, knowing prophecies of resurrection, seek by way of armed knights to keep Jesus’ body from being visited by his followers. But before the sun rises, angels come kneeling before Jesus’ body and proclaim his resurrection, which these knights witness. Caiphas and his cohort seek to persuade these knights to tell the “comune” that a company of Jesus’ apostles came by night, “bywiched” them, and stole Jesus’ body (XXI.154-56). But the first post-resurrection voice of proclamation we hear is instead that of Mary Magdalene, who, after seeing Christ “in godhede and manhede,” cries aloud in “vch a companye ther she cam, *Christus resurgens!*” (XXI.156-60). Peter and the other apostles “parseyued al this” subsequent to Mary’s initial proclamation (XXI.163). The risen Christ now appears before all the disciples, including “Thomas of Ynde,” whom he teaches to “grope / And fele with his fyngeres his fleschelic herte” (XXI.170-71). Thomas’s becomes a second voice of proclamation:

Thow art my lord, Y bileue, god, lord Iesu,  
Deyedest and deth tholedest [suffered] and deme [judge] shalt vs all  
And now art lyuyng and lokyng and laste shalt euere. (XXI.173-75)

It is after Christ’s post-resurrection exchange with the disciples that he seeks out “do best” (XXI.182). In this Christ’s act of Dobet, “Peter” melds into “Peres”: Christ gives Piers “pardoun and power” to absolve sin and extend mercy and forgiveness. This mercy



comes in a “couenaunt” in which penitents agree to render back what they have unjustly claimed for themselves, that is, to “pay / To Peres pardoun the plouhman *Redde quod debes*” (XXI.182-90). Only the sin against the Holy Spirit can Piers not forgive. After Christ’s institution of this new covenant of forgiveness, in which Conscience sees an instantiation of “puyr treuthe,” Christ ascends “heyh vp into heuene,” whence he again “wol come at the laste” (XXI.194, 191-92).

Once Conscience has finished his narration of the life of Christ, we are reminded once more of its context within a liturgical setting, in “myddes of the masse.”

Conscience here prompts Wille to kneel at the cross. And then Wille has a vision:

and thenne cam, me thoute,  
Oen *Spiritus paraclitus* to Peres and to his felawes.  
In liknesse of a lihtnyng a lihte on hem alle  
And made hem konne and knowe alle kyne langages.  
Y wondred what that was and wagged [shook] Conscience  
And was afered for the lihte, for in fuyres liknesse  
*Spiritus paraclitus* ouerspradde hem alle. (XXI.200-06)

Kneeling himself, Conscience tells Wille that this Paraclete is “Cristes messenger / And cometh from the grete god, Grace is his name” (XXI.207-08). Conscience then bids Wille to kneel along with him, and to welcome and worship Grace in song, *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Wille complies and joins with Conscience and “many hundret” in singing and praying, “Helpe vs, Crist, of grace!” (XXI.211-12).

At this point, the scene and means of vision shift once more. Conscience, who had been narrator and teacher, here gets taken up with Piers as an actor in the story he had been telling. Emerging from Wille’s vision of Pentecost, Grace first elicits worship; he then both directs what Wille sees and moves Wille’s former teacher, Conscience, into action. This is surely an appropriate narrative shift. Yves Congar has written of

Aquinas's account of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that they are "dispositions which make the Christian ready to grasp and follow the inspirations of the Spirit."

They are in themselves only a permanent disposition, but one which makes the disciple of Jesus permanently open to have his activity guided, beyond the power of the virtues, beyond his reason as animated by faith, beyond his supernatural prudence, by another who is infinitely superior and has sovereign freedom, in other words, the Holy Spirit. . . . Thomas allows for the *event* of the Spirit.<sup>58</sup>

Wille has just glimpsed a foundational "event of the Spirit" in a pentecostal scene recalling Acts 2. Here, distinctively, it is "Peres and . . . his felawes" who are the Spirit's recipients and who constitute the leadership of the apostolic Church.

This vision of Pentecost, moreover, has come in the direct wake of Conscience's account of Christ as a "souereyn" king. Christ has been perceived as a religious and political threat in his life and so has been executed. He has likewise been revealed, however, as conqueror of sin and death in his resurrection. What sort of social body will emerge from the life Conscience has just depicted, a life now present to "Peres and . . . his felawes" by Grace in the *Spiritus paraclitus*? We have seen voices of proclamation immediately arise in a post-resurrection context, those of Mary Magdalene and the apostle Thomas. Such voices would appear to be the first witnesses to Christ's inbreaking kingdom. Indeed, Langland's language evokes the New Testament's positioning of Jesus' lordship in sovereign relationship to that of Caesar, where "it is Caesar who is the rival; and what he rivals is the Lordship of God in the person of Jesus

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<sup>58</sup> Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Vol. 1, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 119-20. Congar further points out that the "gifts of the Holy Spirit were not distinguished from the virtues until about 1235. The first to make this distinction was Philip the Chancellor" (118). Aquinas accordingly inherits and further attempts to account coherently for this differentiated tradition of virtues and spiritual gifts.

Christ.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, as Conscience has explained, was Jesus named “cayser or kyng of the kyngdoem of Iuda.” We may here be reminded of Holy Church’s invocation of Matthew 22:21 in responding to Wille’s question about the “moneye of this molde” in Passus I. “‘*Reddite Cesari*,’ sayde god, ‘that Cesar byfalleth, / *Et que sunt dei deo*, or ells ye don ylle” (I.48-49). The poem has gone on to invoke a second “*Reddite*” in the new covenant over which Piers presides: “*Redde quod debes*.” This is hardly a spiritualized covenant without political significance. It concerns fundamental questions of justice, of what one owes and to whom one owes it.

In the scene that now unfolds, Grace has Piers and Conscience summon the “comune” for a division of gifts. Here kingship has been transposed to Conscience, with Craft as steward, and Piers, as we have seen, presiding over the penitential register (XXI.256-61). Grace prompts the commons to exercise their own agency to “crouneth Consience kyng and make Craft youre styward,” while Grace himself sets Piers apart for his priestly vocation (XXI.256). Paul’s division of evangelical gifts for the building up of the common good in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 looks noticeably different from Langland’s here, though Langland’s explicit links to this passage are also clear.<sup>60</sup> Paul names gifts like preaching, prophecy, tongues, interpretation, faith, healing, and the discernment of spirits. While Langland mentions two of these, preaching and prophecy, his list also includes a religious form of life Paul does not mention — the contemplative life lived in

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<sup>59</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 112. I have learned a great deal from Rowe’s extraordinary book in attempting to read Langland’s account of Pentecost in the final passus of *Piers*. On Jesus’ kingship in Luke-Acts, see more broadly Rowe, ch. 4. For use of Rowe’s work in a rich reflection on the methodological stakes in construing “Christianity” in the postmodern academy, see Goldstone and Hauerwas, “Disciplined Seeing” (cited in n. 27 above).

<sup>60</sup> For these links, see the commentary in Barney, *Penn Commentary*, Vol. 5, 133-46.

poverty, patience, and “longyng to be hennes” — as well as, more prominently, a series of practical skills of labor like tilling, thatching, cooking, working with numbers, buying and selling, use of language in law courts, and masonry, as well as distinctive intellectual knowledge like that of astronomy (XXI.229-51). In accounting for Langland’s distinctive division of graces, which clearly draws on but extends and transforms Paul’s list, James Simpson has written:

So, unlike Paul’s specifically *evangelical skills*, designed to establish the Church, Langland’s skills here are immediately concerned with the day-to-day working of a whole and complex society. Of course Langland is, like Paul, imagining the foundation of the pristine Apostolic Church, in the Barn of Unity. But Langland is projecting the foundation of the Church as springing from the economic workings of a co-operative, diverse, even complex society as a whole.<sup>61</sup>

If Langland’s pentecostal polity is here a “whole and complex society,” rather than a comparatively tiny apostolic *ekklesia*, he pictures it as nonetheless subsisting in a Spirit-enabled peace and humble mutuality. While Langland’s Pentecost at this point contains no account of the end of Acts 2, where believers are “together and had all things in common,” selling and distributing their possessions to “distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (or rather, while it seems to give this calling to a select group of religious), Langland does envisage here a peaceful form of life issuing from the acknowledgement that “all craft and connyng” has come from Grace’s “yefte” (XXI.252-55; Acts 2:43-47).

What then sets this pentecostal polity apart from that which Holy Church had identified as being so pervasively captive to the maze? Or indeed, has Holy Church herself been displaced by Langland’s Pentecost? On Simpson’s account of this scene, we have at least a notable egalitarian flattening of the poem’s earlier dallies with hierarchy.

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<sup>61</sup> Simpson, ““After Craftes Conseil,”” 115.

Again, kingship, for example, has been transposed to Conscience. However, if we take note of the description of the “cardinales vertues” given to Piers, what Simpson says about this transposition cannot be true: “Here there is no king, except individual conscience, and ecclesiastical functions are posited as being on equal footing with others.”<sup>62</sup> On the contrary, in the poem’s description of Piers’s “cheef seed” (XXI.406), the *Spiritus iusticie*, we read:

*Spiritus iusticie* spareth nat to spille hem [put to death] that ben gulty  
 And for to corecte the kyng and [if] the kyng falle in any agulte,  
 For counteth he no kynges wreth when he in court sitteth  
 To demen as a domesman: adrad was he neuere  
 Nother of deuk ne of deth that he ne dede [if he did not carry out] the  
     lawe  
 For presente or for preyre or eny prinses lettres;  
 He dede equite to alle euene-forth [according to] his knowyng.  
(XXI.301-08)

The display of the virtue of justice here involves the bold correction of those in power, including the king. Indeed, *iusticie* is itself personified as a counselor to the king (“when he in court sitteth”). It is therefore simply not the case that here “there is no king, except individual conscience.” The poem seems perfectly willing at this point to envisage the exercise of the pentecostal polity’s “cheef” virtue in relation to a literal king. Whatever imaginative work this pentecostal scene achieves, it must be doing something besides simply ousting all traces of literal kingship from the poem’s ideal polity and provocatively substituting a royal “individual conscience” instead.

So what sort of provocation is being sought here? Or rather, has Langland simply baptized medieval forms of kingship in the Holy Spirit? Is his Pentecost not after all an

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<sup>62</sup> Simpson, ““After Craftes Conseil,”” 114.

apostolic ideal against which he can leverage criticism of the contemporary status quo?<sup>63</sup>

Langland's treatment of Pentecost is more complex and narratively involved than can be accounted for in looking only to this scene and invoking correlative discrete biblical passages (i.e., XXI.199-334; cf. Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12). The same could be said, of course, for the biblical passages themselves. As we have seen, Langland has taken care in Conscience's retelling of the life of Christ to establish Christ's "souereyn" kingship. Ranging widely across the Gospel accounts in this retelling, Conscience has accordingly been able to explicate christological sovereignty by explicitly recalling biblical contexts of Jesus' Jewish identity. Conscience's teaching in these respects is the indispensable narrative prelude to Wille's vision of Pentecost, in which Conscience will himself get caught up and indeed be named "kyng." Yet Conscience's kingship does not simply oust literal kingship from the poem's purview. Neither does it simply crown "individual conscience" king over an egalitarian political order. These are not yet Langland's provocation. Rather, Conscience becomes the bearer of the story he has told about *Christ's* kingship. Pentecost makes Conscience an inspired (while still all too fallible) actor, an embodied witness to *this* sovereignty. Accordingly, Langland's vision of Pentecost is not contained in this scene as a discrete and isolable "ideal" that the poem simply uses to decry present realities. To read Langland's Pentecost in this way is to misread it, to have forgotten the kinds of narrative refusals we have already seen the poem make in relation to the authority of Piers the plowman. Langland's poem does not

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<sup>63</sup> For invocation of the apostolic ideal as "the great new ecclesiological fact of the later Middle Ages," which produced reflection on the Church that was "at once scriptural, historical, and critical" and so effectively introduced "a new temporal-historical dimension into political thinking," see Gordon Leff, "The Apostolic Ideal in Later Medieval Ecclesiology," n.s., vol. 18, pt. 1 (1967): 58-82 (here at 71 and 81, respectively).

end with Wille's vision of Pentecost. Strikingly, this scene is yet another vision the poem will go on to subject to searching questioning. The work of Pentecost is in fact far from finished. But the poem has at least focused more clearly its central question for these final passus: what sort of polity can most fully give expression to Christ's sovereign kingship? Or put differently, what are the politics of the "treuthe" of the resurrection?

What Wille's pentecostal vision at XXI.199-334 certainly does give expression to is what Holy Church had likewise insisted on: a thoroughly embodied form of faithfulness. On such a view of the horizons of right worship, human practices are not divvied up as either spiritual or material, either religious or secular, either private or public. Langland's inclusion of selling and buying, thatching and cooking, preaching and praying in this scene of the division of graces for the building up of the common good is a way of stressing just this point. Yet this scene is also one more expression of the poem's aspiration to pursue reform across what Simpson calls "a whole and complex society." Langland's rendering of Pentecost here seems to move in a direction opposite to what modern readers might have expected: not from a small, persecuted minority outward but from a large-scale, variegated polity inward. Can such a polity, Langland asks once more, give full expression to the common good?

What the poem in fact goes on to dramatize are the failures of Christian mutuality on these terms and in this scope. Immediately following Wille's vision of the Church's founding, with Piers "to the plouh," Pride appears and "gadered hym a grete oeste [army]" in preparation to "greue . . . Consience and alle cristene and cardinale vertues" (XXI.336-37). Pride's officers announce ill tidings to Conscience and the "cristene peple" he would speak for. Namely, that they will lose the seeds of virtue Piers has

sown, that Piers's barn Unity will be broken open and that Christians will spill out in vulnerable and divided isolation from one another, that the sacrament of penance will be so rhetorically disfigured ("coloured so queyntly and keuered vnder oure sophistrie") it will be turned to ends opposite its intended ones, and that Conscience himself will become an inverted parody of knowledge, who "shal nat knowe ho is cristene or hethene" or whether economic exchange proceeds "with riht, with wrong or with vsure" (XXI.341-50). In response to Pride's frightening prophecy, Conscience counsels "alle cristene" to hole up with him in Unity, where they might together pray for "pees" (XXI.357). Kynde Wit now appears to instruct Conscience and to guide these Christians in the digging of a deep moat around Unity. As David Aers has observed, this is a peculiar teacher to entrust with the Church's self-definition and defense against those forces that would baffle, corrupt, and divide it.<sup>64</sup> The poem has established Kynde Wit's powers as a guide in matters of practical life, as in the temperate management of one's worldly wealth (I.50-53). But it has also, at various points, highlighted his decisive limits — as, for example, in construing Trinitarian counsel (e.g., XIX.108-12). The model of fortress Church over which Kynde Wit now presides likewise seems a far cry from the missionary Church of the martyrs that *Liberum Arbitrium* has recalled and inscribed into the poem's ecclesial imagination (XVII.262-82); as it also seems a far cry from the evangelical Church led by Grace and Piers, tilling truth and faith in the "wyde . . . world," which we have just seen described (XXI.329-34). By his efforts Kynde Wit does, however, prompt a Lenten discipline of penance, wherein his moat fills up with tears of repentance and Unity is said to stand in admirable "holinesse" (XXI.380). But this picture of the

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<sup>64</sup> Aers, "Langland on the Church and the End of the Cardinal Virtues," 62-63.



Church's security prompts Conscience to claim he does not care if Pride and his army should attack. Conscience, a lay figure, now invites those who have engaged in Lenten practices of penance to dine on "bred yblessed and godes body therunder" (XXI.385). He does so on condition that those who would participate in this eucharistic meal render to Piers the restitution that they owe or that each "foryeue other," as the "*pater-noster*" clearly enjoins (XXI.389-94; cf. Matt. 6:12). Conscience is met by a series of rejections and proposed redefinitions of these terms. Indeed, in a complicated dramatic sequence of exchanges Conscience has with a brewer, a "lewed vicory" or uneducated parish priest, a lord, and a king, we witness profound transformations in the language of the virtues the poem had shown given to an apostolic Piers and his Church. As Aers remarks, accordingly: "Kynde Wit's model of a fortress Church has encouraged the mistaken certainty that the threat is from outside."<sup>65</sup>

In other words, as *Piers*'s charged allegories roll on from Pentecost to Langland's present, the poem subjects to withering dramatic critique any complacency about the Church's identification with "a whole and complex society." Those who in their various ways reject Conscience's offer of Communion and in whose speech the *lingua franca* of pentecostal virtue is disfigured are, as Stephen Barney has observed, representatives of the four medieval estates: commons, prelates, magnates, and king.<sup>66</sup> What is outside and what is inside have themselves become questions, not answers. Such was Pride's

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<sup>65</sup> On Langland's depiction of transformations in the language and culture of the virtues, see further Aers, "Langland on the Church and the End of the Cardinal Virtues," 63-70. Aers draws on Quentin Skinner's analysis of the rhetorical term *paradiastole*, a technique of moral redescription, to explore how "Langland has introduced paradiastolic speech to identify a profound and very disturbing challenge in his culture to traditional Christian-Aristotelian ethics and its language of the virtues" (68).

<sup>66</sup> See Barney, *Penn Commentary*, 165-85.

prophecy — a prophecy, as Langland’s allegory would suggest, that now appears self-fulfilling, a whisper in the ear of the postapostolic Church (XXI.348). Conscience himself, inspired bearer, as I have argued, of the story of Christ’s sovereign lordship, is not immune from these questions, disruptions, and blindnesses. Conscience is no Miltonic Abdiel, scornfully and single-mindedly setting his face against Satan:

Among the faithless, faithful only he;  
Among innumerable false, unmoved,  
Unshaken, unseduced, untterrified,  
His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal;  
Nor number, nor example with him wrought  
To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind  
Though single.<sup>67</sup>

Neither Conscience’s own voice nor those voices he wishes to oppose are so transparent to him. When Conscience addresses the king after his offer of Communion, the latter insists on “boldely” being “hoseled” but refuses the terms of *Redde quod debes* because, as he claims, he is no one’s debtor (XXI.465-76). Here is Conscience’s chance to speak truth to power, to display that “cheef seed” of justice Piers had sown that guides its possessors to “spareth nat . . . for to corecte the kyng and the kyng falle in any agulte” (XXI.302-03). But Conscience simply ingests the king’s own terms, a barebones political boilerplate of medieval royal obligation, and repeats them back to him. Thus Langland’s acute depiction of the king’s reliance on Conscience’s counsel, in stark contrast to a prior imagined scene of reform at Westminster (Passus III-IV). Those who oppose Conscience, likewise, reveal that the voice of Conscience is hardly authoritative in the world they know. “For the comune,” says the unlearned but discerning priest,

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<sup>67</sup> *Paradise Lost*, V.897-903; in John Milton, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), p. 444.

“counteth ful litel / The conseyll of Consience or cardinales vertues / Bote hit sowne, as bi sihte, somewhat to wynnyng [unless it speaks to financial gain]” (XXI.451-53). In an exchange with a figure called Nede, Wille himself will face his own opportunity to speak a transformed language of virtue (that of the *Spiritus temperancie*) and to go on “Withouten consail of Consience or cardinale vertues” (XXII.21).

Embattled and helpless though Conscience would appear in these contexts, Langland does provide a picture of faithful resistance before his poem’s end. This is a picture that explicitly recalls, if in inverted terms, a biblical and apostolic Church that is accused of “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). When Wille falls asleep once more in Passus XXII, he sees a vision of the powerful advent of Antichrist, but also of a group of “foles” who defy him.

Auntecrist cam thenne and al the crop of treuthe  
 Turned hit tyd vp-so-down and ouertulde the rote  
 And made fals sprynge and sprede and spede menne nedes [gratify  
   men’s desires];  
 In vch a contrey ther he cam he kutte away treuthe  
 And garte gyle growe there as he a god were.  
 Freres folewed that fende for he yaf hem copes [hooded cloaks]  
 And religious reuerensed hym and rongen here belles  
 And alle hise as wel as hym, saue onelich foles;  
 The whiche foles were gladere to deye  
 Then to lyue lengere sethe leautee was so rebuked  
 And a fals fende Auntecrist ouer all folke regnede.  
 And that were mylde men and holy that no meschief dradden,  
 Defyede all falsenesse and folke that hit vsede  
 And what kyng that hem confortede, knowynge here gyle,  
 Thei corsede, and here consail, were hit clerk or lewed. (XXII.53-68)

Here it is Antichrist who is turning the world “vp-so-down.” He is a fearsome and violent parody of Piers who peaceably tills truth in the “wyde . . . world.” Likewise does he parody Truth himself, “as he a god were.” Langland employs regal language once more in describing the power of Antichrist, who “ouer alle folke regnede.” These “folke”

are said to include kings and their councilors, as well as friars and religious, clerks and laypeople. It is striking that while we have seen Conscience by himself fail to rebuke a king's pretensions, parroting back the king's own self-serving redefinitions of virtue, here these "mylde men and holy" defy and curse king and councilor alike, dreading no "meschief." If we were to look for an Abdiel in Langland's poem — or perhaps a Luther or a Thomas More — it might well be here, among such "foles." But a Conscience who stands alone, faithful and single-minded among the faithless, is not an ideal Langland's poem seems drawn toward, even in isolable dramatic episodes. We have seen rather that Langland tends to portray Conscience in isolation so as to reveal his vulnerability and the all-too-easy assimilability of his individual voice to powerful and antagonistic interests.

In this way, Langland's rich portrayal of Conscience, which extends across his long poem, presses us to see Conscience always in relationship to determinate communities. Langland's identification of Conscience in the last passus with these fools — "vs / Foles," as Conscience himself puts it (XXII.76-77) — gives us precisely such a specification. In this particular specification I see the outworking of Langland's vision of Pentecost.<sup>68</sup> What had at first seemed a bare dictum, even a banality, in Holy Church's teaching about the voice of *kynde knowynge* in Wille's heart — "For to louye thy lord leuest of alle, / Dey rather then do eny dedly synne" (I.142-43) — she went on to exemplify in particular terms in an account of Christ's incarnation and passion. But Holy

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<sup>68</sup> Once more I draw here on David Aers's recent account of the poem's ending, "Langland on the Church and the End of the Cardinal Virutes." For Aers's suggestion that "the direction in which Langland gestures in these 'fools' is *congregationalism*," see 74-76. As Aers notes, such an extraordinary gesture remains given from within Langland's deep commitment to "the unity of the Church embodied in an identifiable polity": this is a commitment the poem displays dramatically and narratively, e.g., in Conscience's and the fools' immediate call to the "comune" *back into* Unity (XXII.74-79).

Church could not seem to locate Wille or herself in an embodied community of such *kynde knowynge*. Just so, she could warn Wille to attend carefully to his own “consience” in the face of a commodifying culture of “coueityse of mede” (II.54). But where besides his own conscience could Wille turn? The formal procedures of Langland’s poem do not encourage us to look for wisdom in isolation. In Passus XXI, in “myddes of the mass,” Wille indeed calls on Conscience to tell him the truth about the mysterious figure he sees before him, who looks at once like Piers the plowman and Jesus the Joustier, harrower of hell. Conscience provides a sustained narration of the sovereignty of Christ the “cayser or kyng” by way of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. This narrative display of Christ’s sovereignty is the prelude to Wille’s vision of Pentecost, in which both he and Conscience will get caught up. As C. Kavin Rowe has remarked of the significance of similar Christological narrative patterns in his account of the politics of Pentecost in the book of Acts: “ecclesiology is public Christology.”<sup>69</sup> What Wille sees in Pentecost is the founding of a polity: a community of virtue, practical skill, craft knowledge, and mutuality born of the acknowledgement of “yefte.” In this polity Conscience is named “kyng,” so bearing the story of Christ’s sovereignty that he himself has related. Yet if this pentecostal polity is at first envisioned to extend across “a

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<sup>69</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 173. As Rowe writes, in Acts “the *missio Dei* has a christological norm.” This norm, he continues, “is displayed narratively in the shape of the life of the Lord’s disciples — Stephen, Peter, and Paul above all, but also the communities of Jerusalem, Iconium, Thessalonica, and elsewhere — where the pattern of a willingness to suffer even unto death is the mimetic reproduction of Jesus’s own life as narrated in the Gospel of Luke and retold in the speeches of Acts. Thus the truth claim about Jesus’s lordship does not lead in Acts to a narrative blueprint for the need to coerce others for their own good but to a form of mission that rejects violence as a way to ground peaceful community and instead witnesses to the Lord’s life of rejection and crucifixion by living it in publicly perceivable communities derisively called Christians.” On Luke’s narration of the public dimension of Christian mission by way of the use of the name “Christian” in Acts, see further 126-35.

whole and complex society,” one that includes the royal and coercive rule of a literal king, we soon see its drastic failures in these terms. By himself, Conscience fails to rebuke a king who wishes to redefine the very terms by which this polity of Pentecost is constituted. This king, as he insists, is no one’s debtor. Like other of Conscience’s interlocutors, then, this king is either not a reliable interpreter of the story Conscience bears or an all too savvy interpreter who sees a pressing interest in coopting and redefining Conscience’s terms. Rowe has remarked in light of Luke’s presentation of chief Roman officials in Acts that “the state is not hermeneutically equipped to discern theological truth, that is, to settle by means of Roman jurisprudence whether or not Torah testifies to Jesus’ resurrection.” Likewise does Luke’s portrayal of Gallio in particular initiate his Gospel’s argument that “the Christian mission is not a zealous bid for Caesar’s power and throne.”<sup>70</sup> This is a mission whose reason for being is resurrection, not insurrection: though this is to speak to its nonviolent form of witness, not the quiescence of what it proclaims. Could Langland be staging a similar set of arguments about the hermeneutic blindnesses and incapacities — or otherwise, the all too knowing cooptations — of the structures of power in his own day? Can the politics of “treuthe” he has outlined be met with genuine recognition by these structures? Such questions seem indeed to emerge by way of Langland’s complex narrative reinscription of Pentecost in the midst of a late medieval Mass.

### **Poetry and Prophecy**

In light of the foregoing analysis, we can return briefly to James Simpson’s intriguing

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<sup>70</sup> Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 147.

suggestion that it is by way of Langland's "conception of the Church" that he achieves a kind of historical imagination (a gift of Grace in Langland's poem) that might be called "prophetic." In contrast to Simpson's memorable picture of what this prophetic vein in Langland reveals and consists in, particularly in the figure of Conscience, I have argued that Langland's Conscience figures something more and something other than tragic isolation. On the terms the poem has given us, Conscience's call to Grace in the poem's final line cannot be less than a call to the one whose Spirit has been poured out in the founding of a community. The poem, moreover, has spent much of its considerable imaginative and intellectual energy specifying what such a community might look like in Langland's present, if perhaps also in a hoped-for future. This is a community in which the voice of Conscience is not simply an exponent of apostolic holiness but persists in calling for "Vnite." Still, this is a unity whose particular terms of discernment matter. Langland's fools embody "skills of recognition," in Rowan Williams's phrase, that are constitutive of their solidarity.<sup>71</sup> In these fools we glimpse the poem's most focused and informed statement on the peculiar kind of wisdom Wille had named *kynde knowynge* and claimed to lack in Passus I. There Holy Church had instructed Wille in this form of knowing by pointing to a unity exemplified in the "souerayne salue" of incarnate love (I.147). She had proclaimed to Wille an account of the embodiment of this sovereignty in a power displayed in mercy and forgiveness. Holy Church's authoritative teaching on "treuthe" had pointed up the contingency of what Wille could glimpse in the maze, both "out there" and "in here." Yet Holy Church had affirmed Wille's language of "knowledge," known intimately and "kyndly," and so her exposure of contingency was

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<sup>71</sup> Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 53.

not born on a track of political reflection grounded in voluntarist assertion or unaccountable satirical suspicion. Langland likewise seems to have taken no turn toward ecclesial triumphalism here, since, as I have stressed, Holy Church remains inarticulate about how the very sovereignty she proclaims is to be embodied in determinate forms of community. Conscience has taken up this charge in the poem's final passus. He further explicates the Christological sovereignty Holy Church had announced, and in a pentecostal activation of his own "kingship," becomes an embodied bearer of this story. It is Langland's fools who recognize Conscience in these terms, and it is among these fools that Conscience can himself recognize community in light of the story he bears: "vs / Foles." Such a "mutual recognition" Rowan Williams has identified in exploring the unity of the Church in its early centuries, a "mutual recognition of language grounded in a common sense of holiness, suffering, and sovereignty." If Conscience is a figure of prophecy, it is because he bears a story and an argument about the terms of political sovereignty, not because, by the end of Langland's poem, he has glimpsed modernity in becoming tragically sovereign himself.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Advise or Consent?: Conscience and Power in *Mum and the Sothsegger*

If the voice of conscience is typically located internally, as binding judgment from within, the poetry of counsel and complaint asks us to hear that voice in its broader application, where judgment can be shared as well as contested. In pursuing this voice, the anonymous early fifteenth-century alliterative poem *Mum and the Sothsegger* attempts to speak up in the face of self-interested silence, which it claims is the order of the day.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, *Mum* finds dumb consent to injustice at the heart of political order in late medieval England. The poem champions “Sothsegger,” the emboldened truth-teller, but it finds “Mum” everywhere shutting up would-be critics. The situation is not without its useful ironies for the *Mum* poet. After all, self-interest and political expediency need to know how and when to speak as much as how and when to keep quiet. So while *Mum* dramatically interrupts whenever the poet’s criticism seems to touch a political nerve, this only gives *Mum* himself a chance to discourse at length. He contradicts to convince others to give up contradiction, fluently extols the uses of keeping mum, even produces stinging moral and political commentary, if only where the stakes are negligible. *Mum* is perhaps the best talker in the poem.

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<sup>1</sup> I quote throughout from Helen Barr’s edition, *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993). Barr dates *Mum* to “shortly after 1409,” based on what she regards as “the last dateable reference” in the poem at lines 408-14. The target of the lines seems to be Arundel’s *Constitutions* of 1409 and perhaps his subsequent letter of March 1409, issued to the provincial clergy, which exempted the friars from the terms of the *Constitutions*. On the poem’s authorship and its relation to the earlier *Richard the Redeless*, see Barr’s introduction, pp. 14-30. See also Simon Horobin, “The Dialect of Authorship of *Richard the Redeless* and *Mum and the Sothsegger*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 18 (2004): 133-52; and Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 161-64. Horobin locates the *Mum* poet to Bristol.

Despite early promise, then, in the *Mum* poet's view, the reign of Henry IV has not produced conditions favorable for truthful speech. *Mum* depicts a scene in which would-be truth-tellers are stricken by fear if not simply caught up in the pursuit of their own private good. The truth-teller, *Mum* declares, is the best man among the king's officers, but nowadays he is hard up for service. If one should "bolde hym to bable the sothe," make bold to speak truth to his sovereign regarding all the "mischief" born of "misse-reule," he might well be imprisoned, tortured, burnt, or otherwise humiliated (165-70). It had not been so when Henry first took the throne. Encouraged by the king's initial promise of "high helpe" to his subjects, a promise the *Mum* poet claims to have heard himself, all men had then been "bolde to bable what hym aylyd," confident in submitting their grievances (147, 144). How Henry's "couenant" is now kept the poet will not say, since he is seldom among the king's inner circle (150-1). The poet is careful rather to indict Henry's advisors and not explicitly Henry himself. Henry, he says, would surely redress the wrongs of the realm if only, informed by better counsel, he knew them.

Yet, explicitly or with some indirection, *Mum* does not leave off addressing Henry's role in the state of affairs it describes, though the poem's relationship to royal power is vexed, even inconsistent. On the one hand, in a striking line of criticism, *Mum* looks trenchantly to Pilate's handwashing before Christ as a figure for Lancastrian oversight of the capital punishment of innocents. Here we glimpse a royal conscience in no way "clensid" (725). We recall, for example, that this was the decade in which capital punishment for heresy had been introduced in England, and in which William Sawtry was burned at Smithfield.<sup>2</sup> In Jewish authorities' silence before Pilate, *Mum* sees in turn a

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<sup>2</sup> For accounts of these measures, see Peter Heath, *Church and Realm, 1272-1461* (London: Fontana, 1988), ch. 8; Peter McNiven, *Heresy and Politics in the Reign of Henry IV*:

likeness of colluding contemporary clergy, who absent themselves from the dirty work of the secular arm—once more in the interests of maintaining a clean conscience—only to shirk their responsibilities for wise, critical counsel. From here the poem engages in a fascinating series of explorations of ethical and political consent, which it sets in implicit tension with a picture of the truth-teller as “brethern by baptesme” with Christ (1246). But on the other hand, the poet’s critical horizons make themselves readily apparent. The poet alludes with some relish to the execution of a group of friars who questioned their new king’s legitimacy (415-20). The *Mum* poet likewise tells a warmly approving story about a group of nobles “Consentyng . . . with crie alle at oones” to the “couetise” of Ghengis Khan (1441). The Khan, like Pilate, is a figure for the Lancastrian prince, though one now offered up in an indiscriminately flattering light (1441).<sup>3</sup> *Mum*’s criticism extends to every estate, though its advocacy is not for truth-telling from all comers—aggrieved laborers, for example—but from members of Parliament who announce “what the shire meneth” on its behalf (161). The poem advocates for the “penylees” but maintains that it is not for the “comun” to oppose the king’s will or even to presume to “construe his werkes” (1459). Chattering laborers distract lords who should be defending borders (1465-68). Such people ought instead to “knowe what thaire kinde is,” to keep to their station (1485). They ought to attend to the wise “cunseille” of their Khan and “construe no ferther,” loving their liege lord by allowing him to lead them in love as he deems fit, “as hymself liketh” (1486-88). Here *Mum* parts ways with the steadier line of

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*The Burning of John Badby* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1987); and Paul Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), ch. 2.

<sup>3</sup> On *Mum*’s “grim exemplum” of the Khan, see Giancarlo, 247-52. Where Giancarlo sees “the opposed figures of the poem” in the dream gardener and “Changwys,” I would add Pilate as a crucial, if undeveloped, figure in the poem’s political iconography.

criticism in Philip Repingdon's letter to Henry IV, included in Adam Usk's *Chronicle*. Repingdon too saw early promise in Henry's accession. With *Mum* too, he laments that now "law and justice are exiles from the kingdom" and "evils multiply themselves everywhere, and hope of relief fades from the grieving hearts of men" (137, 139). But Repingdon, a "true friend" to Henry and a "loyal servant to God," pulls no punches in saying that at the heart of this state of affairs, "instead of the rule of law, the will of the tyrant now suffices [pro lege sufficit tirannica uoluntas]" (136-37). Repingdon prays that the veil might be lifted from Henry's eyes, that he might peer into his own "mind's eye" and recall his promises to God and kingdom (141). In so doing he might be moved to rebalance the scales of justice.

For Repingdon's appeal to Henry's "mind's eye," *Mum* makes varied use of similar appeals to "conscience." It is, moreover, in the particular terms of *Mum*'s call to speak truth that we might specify its vision of a politics of conscience. What are those terms? Edwin Craun has recently underscored how *Mum*'s ethic of truth-telling is explicitly framed in the terms of pastoral fraternal correction (*Mum*, e.g., 72-95).<sup>4</sup> This longstanding pastoral tradition found its sources in the Bible and was in large part made available for medieval writers through reformist materials stimulated by the constitutions of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. As Craun writes: "until *Mum* no Middle English text that I know of advocates extensively and explicitly practicing fraternal correction within the political arena, even within its institutional channels" (124). The *Mum* poet "carries the fundamental pastoral ethics of correction—with its concerns for fulfilling obligations, for the welfare of others, for amendment of life, for a virtuous will and

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<sup>4</sup> Craun, *Ethics and Power in Medieval English Reformist Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

intention, for proper procedure—into the public realm, authorizing and guiding reformist speech” (128). Craun explicates fraternal correction as a social practice, drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of practices as set out in *After Virtue*.<sup>5</sup> The “concerns” of the pastoral ethics of correction that Craun lists correspond to what MacIntyre calls goods “internal” to a given practice. Practices, for MacIntyre, are teleological, goal-directed. Internal goods are those reasons for action that cannot be specified apart from the particular terms of the practice itself, and which can only be competently identified by those with experience in the practice. Habits of excellence ordered to the pursuit of goods internal to a given practice are called virtues. A related distinction for MacIntyre, again relevant to Craun’s account of fraternal correction, is between practices and institutions. Practices require institutions but are not coterminous with them. Institutions, for MacIntyre, “are characteristically and necessarily concerned with . . . external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power, and status as rewards” (*After Virtue*, 194). Furthermore, “the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution” and “the cooperative care for the common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.” In this way, the virtues take on an enormous importance: “Without them, without justice, courage, and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power

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<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, [1981] 2003). Craun does so critically; see his remarks about “the workings of power . . . in structuring agency,” which he finds neglected in MacIntyre’s account of practices: 4, 26-7. On MacIntyre’s thinking about practices across his earlier and more recent work, see Kelvin Knight, “Practices: The Aristotelian Concept,” *Analyse & Kritik* 30 (2008): 317-29.

of institutions” (195).<sup>6</sup> In light of these distinctions in MacIntyre’s account of practices, I return below to what Craun calls the “carry[ing] . . . into the public realm” in *Mum* of the ecclesial practice of fraternal correction. If institutional setting has, in MacIntyre’s words, an “intimate . . . relationship” to practices, this is a “carrying” worth attending to closely (*After Virtue*, 194). I explore *Mum*’s account of what it calls the “craft” of judgment in its relation to the practice of correction and the various goods that Craun identifies as, traditionally, internal to it. In doing so I consider *Mum*’s reformist pursuit of truth as it relates to coercive power. Here, finally, *Mum*’s relationship to *Piers Plowman*, a poem it shows extensive acquaintance with, is telling. Conscience is a shared concern for these two poems, but it does not speak with one voice.

### **How to Spot a Clean Conscience**

After *Mum*’s introductory case for the truth-teller’s services and account of the difficulties he faces at present (1-231), the poem sets out on a quest to determine if Mum or Sothsegger has “mastery” across English society (232-870). This segment ends with the narrator finally glimpsing a live truth-teller, chased off and unemployed as they all are, but he is sitting mutely in a shop front nursing his wounds (845-47). At this point, no doubt imagining something of his own fate in the broken body before him, *Mum*’s narrator falls asleep and dreams up a far different scene (871-1287). We shall return to the dream sequence below. This sequence ends with the poet’s dream authority encouraging him to “lete no feynt herte” keep him from his own literary labor, his “blessid bisynes of . . . boke-making” (1280-81). *Mum* ends as we have it with a very literal denouement, the

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<sup>6</sup> About “external” goods as nonetheless “genuine goods,” see further MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 196.

narrator “unknitting” a bag of books and relaying their contents in counsel to the king and lay lords (1334-1771). Here I will consider the quest segment of *Mum*, which purports to offer a kind of discursive survey and diagnosis of English society. In this portion of *Mum* “conscience” is a word that appears often but whose significance tends to be measured warily.

Having engaged in a “disputeson” (disputation) with Mum in which Mum made a few compelling remarks about self-preservation, the poem’s narrator is “hevy and highly abawd” (depressed and very confused) (242, 293). He sets out for answers to “the matiere of Mvm,” looking first to the universities (310). Disappointed there, he presses on to put his question to those masters of the “glose” (the scriptural gloss), the friars (388). From here the poet moves on to the regular clergy, and then, disappointed once more, to the seculars. Attending a mass service gives him the opportunity to ask if “prest or prelat or prechour” might ever speak truthfully about himself, act accordingly, and declare how the tithes he solicits are used (622-28). The poet’s questing criticism ultimately extends to every institution and estate he can think of (788-96), but the bulk of his remarks is directed at the friars and clergy. For *Mum*, these figures’ claims to “clean” conscience are spurious and require exposure. *Mum*’s criticism invokes a competing locus of authority in the crown. It is with ultimately aggrandizing reference to this authority that the poem makes its case.

Appealing to the friars, the poet hears that Mum is a far better “frende” in the “making of thaire houses” than the Sothsegger (402-3). In response, the *Mum* poet lays out four reasons for his having little “loue” for the “life and . . . deedes” of the friars (406-7). The first concerns friars’ “stirring” of a statute that gave them preaching rights

at the expense of parish priests (cf. Barr 1990: 310, n. 408-13). Second, the poet notes, is a “privy poynt”:

For furst folowid freres Lollardz manieres,  
And sith hath be shewed the same on thaym-self,  
That thaire lesingz [lies] haue lad thaym to lolle [hang] by the necke;  
At Tibourne for traizon y-twyght vp [strung up] thay were. (417-20)

As Andrew Cole remarks on this passage: “the friars persecuted ‘Lollardz’ for their customs, their belief, but now, irony of ironies, the friars themselves have been persecuted for the ‘traison’ of spreading rumors about Richard II’s imminent return from Ireland to reclaim his throne from the usurper, King Henry IV.” The *Mum* poet “takes the punitive energy stored up in ‘lollard’ and directs it back at the friars.”<sup>7</sup> Yet for *Mum*, as we shall see further, the charge of “traison” that ends in friars “lolling” by the neck is not simply a delicious polemical irony. The “punitive energy” the *Mum* poet redirects from the word “lollard” here will find deliberate imaginative expression later in the poem. Not voiced at all by *Mum*, moreover, is the “stand upon constitutional and legal principle,” in Peter Heath’s words, which these “treasonous” friars took in making their claims — “precisely,” Heath adds, “where Henry was most vulnerable.”<sup>8</sup>

The third charge the *Mum* poet makes against the friars is that of hypocrisy. Here the poet launches into a polemic against, among other things, the friars’ pretensions to “conscience.”

Thees good grey freres that mouche loue geten  
For keping of thaire conscience clenner than other [others’],  
Thay goon al bare abouue the foote and by-nethe double [two layers  
underneath]  
With smale semyd [seamed] sockes and of softe wolle,

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<sup>7</sup> Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34; cf. Barr, “*Piers Plowman*” *Tradition*, 311 n. 416-22.

<sup>8</sup> Heath, *Church and Realm, 1272-1461* (London: Fontana, 1988), 238.



For the loue of oure lord harde life induren [. . .]. (424-28)

The language of course bristles with irony. The “loue” the friars get by virtue of their rugged appearance, and which is given in proportion to their own apparent “loue of oure lord,” is skewered in a familiar complaint. The holy reputation friars bear is reduced to dubiously competitive terms: outward display, so friars hope, wins them a conscience cleaner than that of their neighbors. A fourth charge has the friars divvying up preaching districts so as to bag up goods more effectively, in spite of their pretensions to poverty. The poet expands on his charges at length, now setting out to expose his subjects’ real motives.

Thus thaire conscience is y-knowe [known] and thaire crafte eeke [also],  
That hath be kepte cunseil and cloos many dayes [which has been kept  
secret],  
Til al the world wote [knows] what thay wolde meene;  
And that is this trevly, tende [attend] who-so wil,  
Thorough crafte of confession to knowe men intentz, —  
Of lordz and ladies that lustes desiren,  
And with thaire wyly wittz wirchen on euer  
And mulden [knead] vp the matiere to make thaym fatte,  
And gouuernen the grete and guilen [beguile] the poure. (457-65)

The poet sums up: “Thaire clothing is of conscience and of Caym [Cain] thaire werkes” (493). The polemical mode here turns the tables of confessional practice. The poet airs secret knowledge, produces a “confession” of his own so that “al the world” might know the truth. Conscience is laid bare, “what thay wolde meene” discovered: namely, the power conferred by knowledge of “men intentz.” Of course, in light of the poem’s worries about “traison” occupying these same friars’ “intentz,” we may well discern in *Mum* at this point what Paul Strohm has in another context identified as “that constant element of Lancastrian anxiety, the possible difference between seeming and being,

appearance and intent.”<sup>9</sup> The poem’s polemical production of a fraternal confession seems to worry about just this issue.

Dissatisfied, *Mum*’s narrator passes from the friars to the enclosed religious, and then on to the secular cathedral clergy, but to no avail: Mum reigns. On a Saturday he attends Mass, growing “wrothe” with the priest’s silence on the question of the distribution of tithes (619). As Mum had interrupted the narrator early on when he expressed his “dreed” about the consequences of self-serving in the king’s council (223-32), he now disrupts a harangue against the clergy:

And carpe no more of clergie but yf thou cunne leepe,  
For and [if] thou come on thaire clouche, thou crepis not thens  
Til thou wite right wel with whom that thou mellys [with whom you  
speak]. (698-700)

The narrator, in response to Mum here, plays faux-naïf, invoking the charge of “pees” to which clergy are called (703). Witness Parliament, he says, “for prelatz shuld be voidid / Whenne any dome [judgment] of deeth shal be do there, / Al for cause thaire conscience to kepe un-y-wemmyd” [spotless, undefiled] (707-09). Surely one can speak “sothe” to such men of peace “sonest of alle,” and expect only “thanks” (710-11)? *Mum* wryly echoes Holy Church’s teaching in *Piers Plowman* about love as the “plonte of pees, most precious of vertues” (*Piers* C 1.148).<sup>10</sup> *Mum*’s narrator now naively applies this teaching to the clergy who are “not perillous but pacient of thaire werkes, / And eeke the plantz of pees and full of pitie euer, / And chief of al charite y-chose a-fore other [chosen above others]” (*Mum* 702-04). Here we find some of the poem’s most incisive criticism —

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<sup>9</sup> Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 64.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from *Piers Plowman* come from Pearsall’s edition of the C-text.

directed in part at institutional aspects of clerical relations with the punitive measures of the state — put in the mouth of Mum.<sup>11</sup> He tells the narrator, “me semeth that thy sight is sumdele a-dasid [somewhat dazed] / And al myndelee” (715-16). In particular, Mum seizes on the narrator’s ill-formed judgment regarding conscience. Just what is presumed to make or keep conscience “un-y-wemmyd”? Recall Pilate, Mum says,

For Pilate in the Passion among al the people  
 Wilned afre watre to waisshe with his handes,  
 To shewe hym by that signe, of the bloode-sheding  
 Of Crist that vs creed [created] and on the crosse deyed,  
 His conscience was clensid as clene as his handes.  
 Yit was he ground of the grame [injury] and moste guilty eeke [. . .].  
 (721-26; cf. Matt. 27:24)

Pilate’s conscience, so he tries to show, is cleansed of—not by—Christ’s blood. The religious authorities, Mum insists, are likewise evasive, and likewise complicit.

We might set *Mum*’s Pilate alongside a few contemporary accounts of Christ’s trial and passion. In Nicholas Love’s *Mirror* Pilate knows the “enuye” of Jesus’ accusers but is seen as a “wretchede Justice” in that he fears “more to offende hem [them] then to condempne the innocent wrongwisly [wrongfully]” (167-73).<sup>12</sup> In a passion meditation attributed to Richard Rolle, the writer thanks Christ for the “shame, anguyshe, and felonies” he suffered under Pilate and other authorities. Meditating on Jesus’ “blyndfellynge,” the writer turns from the civil and religious authorities to his own sin and need for mercy, asking that Christ “shild me fro perpetuel blyndynge of dampnacioun and excludyng from the blisful syht of thy glorious face, and let me clerly se in to the

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<sup>11</sup> Canon 18 of the Fourth Lateran Council declared: “No cleric may pronounce a sentence of death, or execute such a sentence, or be present at its execution.”

<sup>12</sup> Love. *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Reading Text*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004).

face of my conscience” (72-3).<sup>13</sup> A Wycliffite Good Friday sermon strikes close to *Mum*’s concerns. Commenting on John 18 and 19, the writer finds Christ condemned above all for “heresye” (Hudson, Sermon 179, p. 180).<sup>14</sup> Jesus undercuts Pilate’s claims to power: “Thou shuldist have no power ayen [against] me, but yif it were gouyn [given] thee from aboue” (179). The Wycliffite writer affirms, “nether God ne the emperour yaf [Pilate] power to dampne thus Crist,” and men in power now ought to take note. Whatever power one might have, “al this power mut be reulid [must be ruled] by Goddis lawe.” (180). Here the Wycliffite writer recalls Jesus’ words to Pilate in John 19:11b: “Therefore he that trayede [betrayed] me to thee hath more synne than thou hast.” Yet while “the Iewis synned more, of more malyss and lesse pite,” as the Wycliffite writer comments, Pilate was no innocent. The writer notes that Pilate may have made his ruling “for drede of the emperor, or to plesse the Iewis, to make hym dwelle longe in his offys.” But he concludes: “To dampne a man ayenus conscience excusith hym nether to God ne man.”

*Mum*’s account of Christ’s trial, in tone and generic setting notably different from the above accounts, is two-pronged in its criticisms. First, the poem draws attention to Pilate’s would-be “clensid” conscience. Like the Wycliffite writer, *Mum* asks: is Pilate’s erring conscience excused? And as for all the writers cited above, the answer is assuredly no. Pilate’s parodic baptismal “signe” in *Mum* only betrays his guilt. Yet for *Mum*, the scene is set not devotionally or even didactically in a broad sense but politically and polemically. The poet allows himself no self-reflection in looking in on this scene of

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<sup>13</sup> Rolle, *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, ed. S.J. Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS 293 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Anne Hudson, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, vol. III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

judgment; he does not linger to see in Pilate a mummied, tacitly consenting humanity. There is no question of peering into “the face of my conscience.” The one Pilate condemns is named as creator and redeemer, but no further exploration ensues of the place of Pilate in God’s providence, the possibility of Pilate’s future conversion, or the nature of human knowledge of Christ’s divinity, all traditional topics of theological inquiry, among many others.<sup>15</sup> Pilate, for *Mum*, is an ill-advised “prince” presiding over life and death (728). Second, then, the Jewish leaders who in John 18 do not “enter [Pilate’s] headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover” become here clergy who remain absent, literally and effectively, at such crucial moments (v. 28). Just so they neglect, the poet stresses, a vocation of truth-telling, all so as to keep their consciences “vn-y-wemmyd.” Such counselors should have taught Pilate better, should have “weeded” the anger from his heart as peaceable prelates ought to do (730).

Mum’s picture of Pilate’s speciously “clensid” conscience, recalling friars we have seen work hard for “keping of thaire conscience clenner than other” and the would-be “vn-y-wemmyd” consciences of mummied clergy, begins to focus a broader set of concerns in the poem. As Mum goes on to instruct the narrator on the significance of his Pilate exemplum, he expands on the theme of tacit consent to injustice.

And also in cuntrey hit is a comune speche  
 And is y-write in Latyne, lerne hit who-so wil:  
 The reason is “*qui tacet consentire videtur*.”  
 [“He who is silent is seen to consent”] (743-45)

One who has “sight” of a storm but does not warn his friend is “auctor” of his friend’s resulting injuries, “pryuy” to his pain (737, 741-42). One who has “in-sight” concerning

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<sup>15</sup> For a survey of early Christian and medieval iconography related to Pilate, see Colum Hourihane, *Pontius Pilate, Anti-Semitism, and The Passion in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). For some discussion of twelfth-century theology in relation to the issues I note here, see 181-90.

some wrong, but lets it pass unhindered, is a “doer” of that very wrong (746, 750). Pilate makes the decisive judgment, but the religious leaders tacitly consent and thereby become “doers” themselves. So says Mum, with fluency and force. We are reminded just *who* speaks here when the narrator tells Mum how much he is “pleased” by his teaching and asks Mum to go tell his tale directly to those he has criticized (767). Mum replies: “Nay . . . go loke [for] an othir” (775).<sup>16</sup>

*Mum* wants to show, then, that claimants to conscience may well be, in fact, complicit in its silencing. Yet the poem’s horizon for criticism has its own distinct bounds. *Mum* obtains leverage in making its criticisms by way of the authority of the crown. In “confessing” friars whom it associates with sedition, *Mum* reveals its own absorbing preoccupations with “intentz” that would question Lancastrian royal power. In looking to Pilate, *Mum* makes a paradoxical move. Unlike the Wycliffite sermon (and either ignoring or revising John 19:11), *Mum* shifts the “ground” of culpability in Christ’s death to the prince. Clergy are negligent advisors, even “doers” of harm, but it is Pilate who is “ground of the game and moste guilty eeke.” In this way the civil authority is

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<sup>16</sup> In its different versions (e.g., alternatively, “consentire est tacere”) Edwin Craun calls the legal maxim invoked here a “homiletic commonplace.” (It still had some use for Thomas More: among many accounts, see for example Peter Marshall, “The Last Years,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], pp. 116-38 [at p. 130].) For discussion of its sources see Craun, *Ethics and Power*, 25, 95, 129-30, and 156, n. 66. For William of Ockham’s use and adaptation of the principle, see Takashi Shogimen, *Ockham and Political Discourse in the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 139-44. The *Lanterne of Light* exhibits a similar concern with consent to injustice in the wake of Arundel’s *Constitutions*. A fifth assault the Antichrist will make on the servants of God, the *Lanterne* claims, is “execution”: “the viciouse parte of the laite fro the highest vnto the lowest schullen consent to execute the wickidnes of this viciouse part of the clergie / thane schal this prophecie be fulfilled.” Even so, when Antichrist thinks he has ultimate lordship over all servants of God, “rering vpon hem diuerse gynnes of turmentrie,” he will then fall to “open reprove for euermore.” *The Lanterne of Light*, ed. Lilian M. Swinburn, EETS OS 151 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co.; and Oxford University Press, 1917), ch. 5, pp. 20-1. I am grateful to Fiona Somerset for sharing forthcoming work with me that explores use of the “qui tacet” maxim in MS Cambridge, Sidney Sussex 74, and for conversation on these issues.

accused of radical guilt, but his power as *the* agent of justice and even *the* moral authority is simultaneously consolidated. Clerical guilt is guilt *in reference to* that of the prince. To be silent is to consent to injustice, but to advise as *Mum* does is itself, it seems, to consent to inflated royal power. In the ensuing dream sequence in *Mum*, a truthteller describes (and himself, in a roundabout way, occupies) a society in which a “moste merciful” sovereign rules by reason and lawful judgment, through “contente of the cumpaignie that closeth alle in oone [unites as one]” (1031, 1037). If clerical consent was shown to be unjust, hanging Pilate out to dry, here the “contente of the cumpaignie” is precisely consent to or contentment with a just order. These subjects serve their king instinctively and loyally, bearing him up whenever he grows weak and stumbles, till he is “better amended” (1043). Over this order—even, ultimately, over its king—a model lay truthteller wisely, and punitively, presides.

### **How to Squash a Wastrel**

When we meet *Mum*’s dream teacher he is busy at work, modeling the vocation he will go on to explain and advocate for. The *Mum* narrator’s last waking sight had been the ailing body of a harassed truthteller. Now finding himself, in his dream, in a beautiful landscape, the narrator spots an old man and spends several lines describing how “semely a sage” this man is—indeed, the most “comely . . . creature” nature has yet produced (960, 962). So what is this comely creature doing?

He houed [hovered] ouer a hyue, the hony forto kepe  
 Fro dranes [drones] that destrued hit and dide not elles;  
 He thraste [squashed] thaym with his thumbe as thicke as thay come,  
 He lafte noon a-live for thaire lither taicches [evil vices]. (966-69)

In addition to his duties as beekeeper, the old man likewise weeds his garden and “daisshe[s] . . . to deeth” the worms that would eat its produce (981). But it is the drones who really occupy his energies: “deye mote thay alle,” as he puts it (982). For the bee itself, the gardener goes on to say, is of all creatures the most admirable in its busyness, a pretty worker for the “profite of the people” (989-91). Bees are ruled in lowliness, labor, and law. They have a king by natural instinct, the most “merciful” creature among them (1031). They “sue and serue” their sovereign dutifully and spontaneously, always obeying his (this is a king bee and not a queen bee) “biddyng” (999-1001). The bees are ingenious and crafty, share a language, and bumble away harmoniously (1028-30). Their king, merciful and meek, is either without a stinger altogether or simply will not use the one he has. “For venym doeth not folowe hym but vertue in alle workes” (1035). By the end of the gardener’s account, it is not very surprising to learn that the sovereign rules through the carefree “contente” of this whole company (1037).<sup>17</sup>

Yet the hive does face a menace in the “wastrel” drones, and the gardener returns to the point. The drone, he says, is beyond doubt the source of all problems in the hive: “the deueil hym quelle” (1044). Drones “deceipuen” the other bees and work by “subtilte” to infiltrate the hive while the others are out working, so supping on the fruit of the other bees’ labor (1050-53). But while the worker bees “knownen” the drones “as kindly as clerik doeth his bokes,” and on occasion “seruen” and “quiten” them accordingly, they cannot keep up production on their own (1016, 1053, 1086). “[S]cant

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<sup>17</sup> Mum’s guide to bee politics is Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. See the notes in Barr, “*Piers Plowman*” Tradition, and ch. 7 in Barr, *Socioliterary Practice*. For a stimulating survey of hive politics, see too Bee Wilson, *The Hive: The Story of the Honeybee and Us* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2004), ch. 3.



hony” should be produced apart from the gardener’s vigilant, violent intervention (1059-61). The bees are typically “so bisi . . . about comune profit,” so mindful of the limited seasonal “tyme” they have for working, that they have little “wittes” left for attending to drones (1078-81). The beekeeper’s job, therefore, is to squash the drones before they enter the hive. For once they are inside, his “eyen [shal] be dasid / Fro al kinde knowlache, so couert thaym helpeth” (1062-63).

If the bees recognize the drones “kindly,” naturally, a would-be beekeeper needs training. The dreamer therefore asks his teacher how to recognize these drones “thorough craft of your scole” (1065). By what craft might one spot a waster, so as not to be “dasid / Fro al kinde knowlache”? “Thay been long and lene,” the gardener says,

. . . and of a lither hue [evil color],  
 And as bare as a bord, and bringen nought with thaym;  
 But haue thay hauntid the hyve half yere to th’ende,  
 Thay growen vnder gurdel gretter than other,  
 And noon so sharpe to stinge ne so sterne nother [neither].  
*Nichil asperius paupero cum surget in altum. Gregorius.*  
 [“Nothing is as harsh as a pauper when he is raised to prosperity.”]  
 (1069-73)

The combination of an ascetic leanness and a lack of material possessions (these wasters “bringen nought with thaym,” but they do not depart empty-handed) will remind us of the poet’s previous targets in the friars. Clergy too, in asking for tithes of parishioners “Of hony in your hyves and of your hony-combes,” now look like so many drones (608).

Earlier polemical modes, discovering pseudo-clean consciences, now seem more threatening. In the section on the friars, the poet had framed his criticism in the terms of a benign, if sharp-tongued, fraternal corrector: “Now take my tale as my intent demeth [in terms of my intent], / And ye shal wel wite I wil thaym no mischief” (466-67). Under the cover of the dream fable, the poet’s language sharpens intensely: “daisshe thaym to deeth

and delue oute thaire dennes”; “deye mote thay alle”; “the deueil hym quelle”; “nape thaym on the nolle.” The poet’s earlier assurance of good will cannot but strike us, in this light, as cynical. What have become of those goods internal to the practice of correction? It is not entirely clear what literal referent the “squashing” of a drone-friar might carry, but the figure does seem to rule out “amendment of life.”

In Edwin Craun’s presentation of the practice of fraternal correction, he notes that it fostered “complex ethical reasoning” about constitutive human ends (*Ethics and Power*, 6, 24). It was typically seen not negatively but positively: for example, as a spiritual work of mercy (25). For all pastoral writers, it was the generative “movement of charity” that made correction “fraternal.” This was a disposition to seek the happiness of others, their liberation from evils that destroyed them and the communities in which they lived (24). The practice depended on a “basic reciprocity” in which a corrector also showed willingness to confront his or her own sins and repent (55). Correction offered an *alternative* to violence, which might otherwise have erupted from privately held qualms (72). Yet as Craun notes too, the tradition contained a crucial distinction between *subditi* and *praelati*, subject and superior, love and justice. It is a distinction that “protects—indeed . . . foregrounds and reinforces—a superior’s disciplinary power to command, coerce, and punish through the apparatus of Church and state.” Subject and superior may both admonish, “but only the latter punishes . . . only the superior is obligated to look after the good of the whole community” (32). This distinction contained ambiguities in theory and practice, and later writers could deal with it, as Craun shows, in radically innovative ways. John Wyclif, Craun argues, welds the two poles occupied by *subditi* and *praelati* together, forging a “potent new weapon of both justice

and charity . . . in the hands of the grace-filled laity” (99). Wyclif “uses fraternal correction as a tool to redistribute power in institutional life” (97). Even so, the practice remains “rooted,” for Wyclif, “in its governing principle of fraternal charity” (90). Later Wycliffite writers, on Craun’s account, take up correction with gusto, presenting themselves as “the true heirs of the movement of pastoral reform, working to extirpate sin in lay people and clerics alike and to educate them in their fundamental responsibilities, as dictated by scriptural precept” (103). For these Wycliffites, correction can become “a defensive weapon, rather than primarily Wyclif’s offensive weapon in the campaign for disendowment.” Yet here too, as Craun points out in the text *Of Pseudo-Friars*, there is an “order” to correction: “Central to this ‘order’ is the expected charitable will of pastoral tradition, even more important to Wycliffites because their Wycliffian use of correction to threaten to disendow clerics left them open to charges that lust for clerical goods and power fueled their reproof” (109-10).<sup>18</sup>

The *Mum* gardener does describe his work in terms of justice, of what is “deue” (due) to the worker bees while illicitly “devoured” by the drones (1066). But all pretense to charity, to “correction” in any meaningful sense, disappears: “deye mote thay alle.” The king bee, not surprisingly in light of *Mum*’s picture of Pilate, is said to be either without a stinger or disinclined to use the one he has. But the gardener himself serves as a stinging, or rather squashing, proxy. In the same way he takes up a kind of representational violence on behalf of the wronged worker bees. In doing so he is said to imitate what the bees themselves do, learning by craft the bees’ own kind knowledge of drones and their behavior. Yet if the gardener imitates, he also takes over this duty in

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<sup>18</sup> See too Shogimen, *Ockham and Political Discourse*, ch. 3, on Ockham’s use of fraternal correction.

policing the hive, himself now consolidating, aspirationally, all powers of coercion. Lay power and royal power work in tandem: but what becomes of correction in this partnership? In his illuminating study, Craun passes over the significance of the drones and their fate at the hands of the gardener (*Ethics and Power*, 130). I see this sequence in *Mum* as directly linked to whatever uses the poem claims for fraternal correction. The “craft” of judgment set out in this dream sequence looks less like a form of “complex ethical reasoning” and more like a set of instructions on the marking of undesirables for violence. Helen Barr sees in the drones a “coded Wycliffite representation of the friars” (2001: 167).<sup>19</sup> Code-making is hardly a craft of careful ethical description, which *Mum* presumes to give us. It seems hardly the product of a hermeneutic of judgment that one might call Christian prudence, a principal virtue traditionally expected to inform would-be fraternal correctors (Craun 24).<sup>20</sup> The terms of this community-constituting practice of correction, appealed to explicitly outside the dream, seem *instrumentalized* by the time we see their upshot in the gardener’s teaching. The bee fable has “much menyng,” surely, but it is all “to mistike for me,” as the poet explains (1088-89).

### ***Mum, Piers Plowman, Truth, and Power***

The busy bees know the drones, *Mum* tells us, in the same instinctive way they

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<sup>19</sup> Barr, *Socioliterary Practice*, 167.

<sup>20</sup> For relevant comments here, which take up prudence in the context of friendship, fraternal correction, anger, and forgiveness (cf. Leviticus 19 and Matthew 18), see Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), ch. 6. For discussion of the culture of code-making and censorship in medieval and early modern England, see Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), chs. 1-2.

spontaneously serve their sovereign: “as kindly as clerke doeth his bokes” (1016). This phrase echoes Piers’s claim in *Piers Plowman* to know Truth “as kyndely as clerk doth his bokes” (C 7.182). We may pause here, finally, over *Mum*’s particular uses of *Piers Plowman* on the question of truth, its availability to human practical reasoners, and the practices that might sustain its vitality in a human life.

Early in *Piers*, teaching on truth takes up a number of crucial strands to which the poem will return over and again. In *passus* 1, Holy Church intimately links truth, that best of treasures, to charity (1.81-7; 135-36). Truth himself “telleth,” Holy Church says, “that loue ys triacle to abate synne” (1.146). Love is “the plonte of pees” that heaven itself could not hold, “Til hit hadde of erthe ygoten [begotten] hitsilue” (1.148-50). “And for to knowe hit kyndly,” Holy Church continues,

hit comeseth by myhte,  
 And in the herte ther is the hed and the heye welle.  
 For of kynde knowynge of herte ther comseth a myhte  
 And that falleth to the fader that formede vs alle,  
 Lokede on vs with loue, let his sone deye  
 Mekeliche for oure mysdedes to amende vs alle.  
 And yut wolde he hem no wo that wrouhte hym al that tene [suffering]  
 Bote mekeliche with mouth mercy he bysoughte  
 To haue pitee on that peuple that paynede hym to dethe.  
 Here myhtow se ensamples in hymself one  
 That he was myhtfull and meke, and mercy gan graunte  
 To hem that hengen hym hye and his herte thorlede [pierced]. (1.159-70)

In *passus* 7, when Piers himself first appears in the poem, he directs a throng of eager pilgrims on the way to truth. “I know hym,” Piers says, “as kyndely as clerk doth his bokes. / Conscience and Kynde Wyt kenned me [taught me the way] to his place” (7.183-84). Piers goes on to provide an allegorical map of the way to truth. Among its directions is that one “in none wyse apayre [harm]” one’s neighbors (7.211). Only at the map’s endpoint, “yf Grace graunte the to go in this wyse [way],” may one see truth to “sitte in

thy sulue herte" (7.254-55). In the plowing of the half-acre in *passus* 8, Piers deals in "puyre tene" with "wastours," seeking vengeance on them in the very language his map had used in prohibition: "Now by Crist . . . Y shal apayre yow alle" (8.167). But he cannot escape truth's teaching in his effort to "amayster" those in his care (8.220). Seeming to link his "puyre tene" with Christ's ("al that tene," as Holy Church put it), Piers now sees in his company of idlers and vagrants "my bloody bretherne, for god bouhte vs alle" (8.216). "Treuthe tauhte me ones," he goes on, "to louye hem vchone / And to helpe hem of alle thyng ay [ever] as hem nedeth" (8.217-18). Liberum Arbitrium in *passus* 17, teaching that Holy Church itself is "Charite," tells Wille to "Loue thyn enemye entirely, goddes heste [command] to fulfille" (17.142). A corresponding picture of solidarity in sin comes in Liberum Arbitrium's remark, "Adam was as tre and we aren as his apples" (18.68). The Samaritan in *passus* 19 counsels, "Beth nat vnkynde . . . to youre emcristene [fellow Christian]" and shows the way in his treatment of *semyuief*, half-alive (19.230). When Wille, in the midst of Mass in *passus* 21, sees "Peres the ploughman . . . peynted al bloody" and "riht lyke in alle lymes to oure lord Iesu," he calls, once more, on Conscience to explain to him the truth about what he sees (20.6, 8). Conscience relates a *vita* of Christ and directs Wille to Grace or the Holy Spirit, who declares that, "Thouh somme be clenner then somme . . . / all craft and connyng cam of my yefte [gift]" (21.252-53). So "he that moest maistries can" is to be "myldest of berynge" (21.255). Grace now crowns Conscience "kyng" and makes Piers his "procuratour and reue," ordained to preside over the sacrament of the altar, the Church's focal practice for restitution and reconciliation (21.258, 382-90).

*Mum*, we have seen, echoes Holy Church's teaching about the plant of peace, but sets this echo in the context of a critique of a mummied clergy. The clergy, *Mum*'s narrator says naively, are "the plantz of pees and full of pitie euer / And chief of al charite" (703-04). *Mum* himself corrects the narrator in his naivete about the clergy as "peaceful" men. Prelates "aughten haue pite when princz bee moeued / And reede thaym [advise them] so that rancune [rancor] roote not in hert" (728-29). Clergy ought to display the charity Holy Church describes as the plant of peace, but instead, *Mum* alleges, they abide—and perhaps sow—weeds of rancor and vengeance. *Mum* seems, then, to dispute Langland's depiction of the Church at this point in *Piers Plowman*. But *Mum*, in revising Holy Church's account of the passion of Christ to criticize a prince and his negligent, absentee advisors, locates "pite" exclusively as a clerical responsibility in counsel to the king. This call to pity is put to polemical use: the clergy have been derelict in their duties. Where does this "pite" escape to in *Mum*'s aspirational vision in the dream sequence, in the craft of judgment the gardener recommends? Holy Church's account of Jesus' own speech, in reference to wrongs done to himself, finds no counterpart in *Mum*: "Bote mekeliche with mouth mercy he bysoughte / To haue pitee on that people that paynede hym to dethe." While Piers knows truth kindly and offers up a map to his dwelling place, even Piers sees truth's active, ongoing, rebuking work in his heart. Truth's teaching continues to surface afresh in memory, and to correct him: "Treuthe tauhte me ones to louye hem vchone." But Piers's attendant picture of his "bloody bretherne" in Christ, a solidarity we have noted in various iterations in *Piers*, finds significant revision in *Mum*. Now it is the truthteller *alone* who is "brethern by baptesme" with Christ (1246). We see *Mum*'s truthteller as set apart from the crowd of

munners about him, but not as himself subject to judgment, even in a section that seems to echo Wille's *C.5 apologia*, his searching exchange with Conscience and Reason (cf. *Mum* 1091-1114).<sup>21</sup> A key term in the teaching on truth, its work in oneself, and its relation to power in *Piers Plowman* has therefore been occluded.

### Conscience and *Contra*

Truthtelling, for *Mum*, means being willing to “withseye” (gainsay) (245). A worthy truthteller is “bold to bable.” *Mum*’s counsel is therefore the reverse: “Cumpaignye with no contra yn no kynnes wise [kind of way], / But parle [speak] for thy profit and plaise [pleasure] more here-aftre” (256-57). This essay has sought to chart the terms of conscience as “contra” in *Mum*. In view of a variety of contemporary claims to conscience, *Mum* counsels a wary reserve, even an outright suspicion. Yet *Mum* locates its own corrective practice of truthtelling in various fictions of representation that are in turn bound up with a markedly regal politics of reform. Its conscientious “contra” here is carefully bounded. Lay truthtelling emerges as a possibility only by way of appeal to royal power, and I have asked what sort of criticism emerges from this partnership. Lynn Staley has rightly observed of *Mum*: “Though the poem grants the poet a voice, it locates him in relation to a good that emanates from a good and wise (Lancastrian) king.”<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> The poem is capable elsewhere of a reflexive turn to conscience, as when it criticizes English law: “For in my conscience ne in my credo yit couthe I neuer vele [feel] / But that oure lawe leneth [is biased] there a lite, as me thenketh” (1624-25).

<sup>22</sup> Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 324. See too David Aers and Nigel Smith, “English Reformations,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 40.3 (2010): 425-38, on “the centralization of power [as] an integral process in the medieval church and in the formation of the state in late medieval England . . . a marker of *continuity* between the English Middle Ages



truth-teller's craft, ordered in pursuit of this "good," makes instrumental use of an ecclesial tradition of correction and reduces judgment to code-making. Lamenting that "Mvm wol be no martir while mytres [bishops' mitres] been in sale" and that truth is now so ill-treated, *Mum* envisions its truth-teller as persecuted for righteousness' sake (1236, 847). But in response the poem fantasizes about truth's return in triumphalist terms: truth will "quyke agayne and quite [repay] alle his foes" and "al wickid wede into waste tourne" (190, 191). Rowan Williams offers terms for discrimination among different pictures of martyrdom, relevant to *Mum*'s remarks here: "There is such a fine line, it seems, between martyrdom as the acknowledgment and demonstration of a different kind of power and martyrdom as a bid for the same power, something that will be a trump card in the struggle for control of the world."<sup>23</sup> In its call to truth *Mum* does not join *Piers* in acknowledging, accordingly, "a different kind of power," a different kind of "myhte." In this way *Mum*'s politics of conscience, despite its more acute expressions, can end up as a bidding for power of an all too conventional kind.

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and those English reformations initiated by the crown in the sixteenth century, reformations in which that medieval institution known as Parliament was a crucial agent" (at 428).

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 104.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Seeing Double: John Bunyan and the Mutualities of Dissent

“*Temporall and Spirituall* Government, are but two words brought into the world, to make men see double, and mistake their *Lawfull Sovereign*.”

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), III, ch. 39

“ . . . how came such a piece of *nothing* as thou art to be so highly conceited of thine own judgment?”

*Dirt Wip’t Off; or, A Manifest Discovery of the Gross Ignorance, Erroneousness and Most Unchristian Wicked Spirit of One John Bunyan, Lay-Preacher in Bedford* (1672)

In a chapter in his *Leviathan* (1651) devoted to “Those Things that Weaken, or Tend to the Dissolution of a Common-Wealth,” Hobbes lists the twin “poysons” of private judgment concerning right and wrong and the traditional Christian teaching that “whatsoever a man does against his Conscience, is Sinne.”<sup>1</sup> “For a mans Conscience,” Hobbes explains, “and his Judgement is the same thing; and as the Judgement, so also the Conscience may be erroneous.” That conscience, though binding as one’s best judgment, was nevertheless not an angelic faculty and so could be in error had long been recognized by a range of moral philosophers and theologians, from Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of erring conscience in the *De Veritate* and the *Summa Theologiae* to the influential Puritan treatise, heavily indebted to Aquinas, William Ames’s *Conscience: with the Power and Cases Thereof* (Lat., 1632; Engl., 1639). In Aquinas’s view as in Ames’s, conscience was an act of practical reason applied to action, past, present, or future; it was judgment that depended on a natural habit of moral knowledge that Ames joined the medieval

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), ch. 29, p. 210.

tradition in calling “synderesis,” but it was not identical to that habit. While synderesis was infallible, conscience could go wrong. It needed sound instruction and formation in the virtues, and could mislead one even as it bound one to act according to its judgment.<sup>2</sup> On this view, while conscientious conviction was premised on introspective self-knowledge, it was also explicitly indexed to communal life, for good and ill. Error was relationally discovered, even as it might also be relationally obscured. Conscience was also a source of critique, since for writers like Aquinas and Ames positive law was only just insofar as it approximated the justice of natural and divine law.<sup>3</sup> But even if conscience was in error—i.e., if it could in principal be shown to be so by another person or seen as such by oneself in retrospect—it remained a judgment of reason that recommended itself to the will as morally binding. As Ames puts this point:

Conscience, though erroneous, bindes alwaies so, that hee that doth against it, sinneth. The reason is, because he that doth against conscience, doth against Gods will: though not materially, and truely; yet formally, and by interpretation: because what the conscience doth declare, it declareth as Gods will. . . . he that contemneth Conscience, contemneth God himselfe; because that which Conscience doth dictate, is supposed to be the will of God. Hence it is that he alwaies sinneth who doth any thing against Conscience . . . . (*Conscience* I.vi, pp. 11-12)

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<sup>2</sup> For the principal discussions in Aquinas, see *S.T.* I.79.12-13, I-II.19.5-6, I-II.94.6, and I-II.96.4; and *De Veritate*, qq. 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding some of the important shared terms I note here, of course, Aquinas and Ames drew very different conclusions about the relationship of scripture to natural law, and the relationship of both to ecclesiastical and civil power. While, for example, Aquinas says that synderesis contains simply the “first principles” of practical reason, just as *intellectus* is the habit that contains the first principles of speculative reason, Ames widens the scope of synderesis to include “partly of morall principles that are naturally in us, together with their conclusions; and partly, of those which God besides them hath enjoined. But the revealed will of God whereby man knowes his duty, containeth both these.” See Ames, *Conscience: with the Power and Cases Thereof* (Puritan Reprints, 2010), I.ii, p. 6.

For Ames, as again for Aquinas too, it was a more troubling error to show contempt for conscience by flouting it in practice than simply to be mistaken in one's judgment in the first place, and to act accordingly. What counted as the most dangerous error of all for Hobbes, by contrast, was precisely the idea that individual conscience was binding in practical terms. Anything that smacked of a "double vision," which might subject civil power and the social contract over which it presided to fundamental scrutiny or practical challenge, was to be cast off as a relic of a prescientific political order, an order that Hobbes had come to see as ever tenuous and always at least latently anarchic.

Yet if in the face of what seemed a potentially explosive fragility in common life, Hobbes sought to put politics on a brave new footing in *scientia*, what sense could be made of the old language of *conscientia*?<sup>4</sup> How was moral knowledge to be discovered and acknowledged? In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes offers his own etymology of "conscience," highlighting the word's debasement in its widespread contemporary usage:

When two, or more men, know of one and the same fact, they are said to be Conscious of it one to another; which is as much as to know it together. And because such are fittest witnesses of the facts of one another, or of a third; it was, and ever will be reputed a very Evill act, for any man to speak against his *Conscience*; or to corrupt or force another so to do: Insomuch that the plea of Conscience, has been alwayes hearkened unto very diligently in all times. Afterwards, men made use of the same word metaphorically, for the knowledge of their own secret facts, and secret thoughts; and therefore it is Rhetorically said, that Conscience is a thousand witnesses. And last of all, men, vehemently in love with their own new opinions, (though never so absurd,) and obstinately bent to maintain them, gave those their opinions also that revered name of Conscience, as if they would have it seem unlawfull, to change or speak

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<sup>4</sup> For a brilliant recent account of Hobbes's *scientia civilis* and the interpretive frameworks it sought to displace, see Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), ch. 8. Here see too Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), ch. 8.

against them; and so pretend to know they are true, when they know at most, but that they think so. (*Lev.*, I, ch. 7, p. 37)

For Hobbes, the turn to a metaphorical sense for conscience—from a collective acknowledgment of “fact” to an internal witness, and then careening off into a sanctified solipsism—could hardly be a welcome one. In conscience’s tangled linguistic history, its metaphorization had concealed the *invention* of a private sphere, both as a new realm of interiority and as a peculiarly inaccessible reason for public action: “My conscience made me do it.”<sup>5</sup> As he remarks elsewhere, performatively flagging for his readers the marked difference between metaphor and simile, and his preference for the latter: “Metaphors, and senseless and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui*; and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention, and sedition, or contempt” (*Lev.*, I, ch. 5, p. 25). Hobbes insists that a polity’s peace and security are only as stable as the perspicuity of its language. “Conscience” was a trojan horse, a hallowed word with a presumption to knowledge that in fact hid an army of unruly opinion.

In the wake of the English civil wars and in the midst of gathering controversy over toleration of “tender consciences,” Hobbes put his finger on real and lasting questions for a self-consciously “modern” politics.<sup>6</sup> What kinds of knowledge would count in public life? What separated genuine conviction from mere self-interest? To what kinds of authority would the judgment of individual conscience be accountable? And given Hobbes’s worries about the figurative powers of language, concealing and

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<sup>5</sup> For an insightful reading of Hobbes on these themes, see Karen S. Feldman, “Conscience and the Concealments of Metaphor in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34.1 (2001): 21-37.

<sup>6</sup> On the career of the phrase “tender conscience,” see Paul H. Hardacre, “Sir Edward Hyde and the Idea of Liberty to Tender Consciences, 1641-1656,” *Journal of Church and State* 23 (1971): 23-42.

revealing in excess of the contracted clarities of “exact definitions,” what forms might a Hobbesian—or counter-Hobbesian—imagination assume?<sup>7</sup> In fact, by the time he wrote *Leviathan* Hobbes was of two minds himself on questions of conscience and judgment. On the one hand, with a compelling interest in the history of heresy and its entanglement with ecclesial and civil power, Hobbes defends liberty of thought and advocates for what he styles as an unalienated reason, one that does not “lose its labor” by faith or trust in authority but seeks out definitional clarity and syllogistic coherence in all its inquiries (*Lev.*, I, ch. 5, p. 22). “Method” was liberating, and it was to be the basis of a new, scientific politics of peace and security. But on the other hand, Hobbes so closely binds judgment about practical action to civil law, defined and guaranteed by sovereign power, that “conscience” is emptied of all practical significance, beyond questions about mere self-preservation. Moving unsteadily between advocacy for tolerance of difference of opinion and a drive to behavioral uniformity, Hobbes sinks a wedge between thought and action. Law, he writes, is “the measure of Good and Evill actions,” “the publique Conscience” (*Lev.*, II, ch. 29, p. 210). Hobbesian judgment is famously subordinate to that “*Mortall God*” who ensures for each commonwealth “Peace at home, and mutual ayd against . . . enemies abroad” (*Lev.*, II, ch. 17, p. 108). Subjects “submit their Wills, everyone to his Will, and their Judgements, to his Judgement.” As Richard Tuck has demonstrated, having changed his mind in important respects from *De Cive*, Hobbes

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<sup>7</sup> In a subtle reading linking Hobbes’s worries about the imagination to his project of fashioning a new poetics of political subjectivity, which ironically needed to capture the imagination, Victoria Kahn writes that Hobbes was engaged in “replacing the plot of mimetic desire [as in romance] with the plot of political science” and so of “creating the abstract liberal subject, whose interior life has been relegated to the private sphere, and who has been made—at least in theory—calculable and dependable.” See Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), ch. 6 (here at 151).

emerged in the *Leviathan* as a “radical tolerationist,” with Locke supporting a policy of toleration and “liberty of conscience.”<sup>8</sup> And yet Hobbes’s very understanding of what guaranteed such policy was a philosophical fantasy of sovereign power, one that rendered conscience practically inert. Civil power, Hobbes imagined, could preside over an “established order of names” that displaced the insidious mystifications of metaphor, “conscience” the foremost metaphorized offender of them all.<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter I look to an unlikely interlocutor for Hobbes’s critique of conscience and the wider climate of post-civil wars skepticism about “private judgment” as a guide to practical action in which Hobbes’s critique found a place—the tinker, polemicist, preacher, and allegorist John Bunyan. In his *Defence of the Doctrine of Justification, by Faith in Jesus Christ* (1672), which he wrote from prison in response to the “latitudinarian” vicar Edward Fowler’s *The Design of Christianity* (1671), Bunyan declares that he has “broken the head” of Fowler’s “Leviathan.”<sup>10</sup> Bunyan’s claim here was more than mere bluster. Bunyan thought he had detected in Fowler’s apologetics for the Restoration church and government a thinly veiled Hobbism, one that subordinated moral judgment and practical action to sovereign power, which as recent events had made clear, could be a fickle thing. Bunyan’s charge that Fowler, a former Presbyterian who conformed at the Restoration, made use of “several Consciences” was more than simple moralizing about perceived hypocrisy (*Defence* 101). Across his work, likewise,

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Tuck, “Hobbes and Locke on Toleration,” in Mary Dietz, ed., *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 153-71.

<sup>9</sup> Feldman, “Conscience and the Concealments of Metaphor,” 32.

<sup>10</sup> *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, gen. ed. Roger Sharrock, vol. 4, ed. T. L. Underwood (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 95.

Bunyan's defence of conscience was still more subtle than a simple articulation of resistance to state-sponsored coercion. We are perhaps most familiar with Bunyan the "prisoner of conscience," who in 1661 before Paul Cobb, clerk of the peace in Bedfordshire, reportedly proclaimed: "Sir . . . the law hath provided two ways of obeying: The one to do that which I in my conscience do believe that I am bound to do, actively; and where I cannot obey actively, there I am willing to lie down, and to suffer what they shall do unto me."<sup>11</sup> Yet Bunyan was as much a critic of coercion by the Restoration government as he was of an emergent market nominalism in which exchange value trumped all moral reflection.<sup>12</sup> In *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* (1680), Bunyan dealt carefully with questions concerning "How . . . shall a man of tender conscience doe, neither to wrong the seller, buyer, nor himself, in buying and selling of

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<sup>11</sup> *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*, in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 128-29. On this text, which circulated in manuscript in Bunyan's lifetime and was printed posthumously in 1765, see Roger Sharrock, "The Origin of *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*," *Review of English Studies* n.s. 10, no. 29 (1959): 250-56. On Bunyan's view of political obligation, see R. Greaves, "The Spirit and the Sword: Bunyan and the Stuart State," in Greaves, *John Bunyan and English Nonconformity* (London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 1992), 101-26. Insightful commentary on Bunyan's trial and imprisonment can also be found in C. Hill, "Toleration in Seventeenth-Century England: Theory and Practice," in Susan Mendus, ed., *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 27-43. As Hill notes: "Bunyan was no political leader; politics were by no means his main concern"; and yet, "Bunyan's spell in prison was longer than that meted out to anyone at the restoration who was not a regicide or an active revolutionary leader" (29). Hill's essay tries to make sense of Bunyan's treatment in light of these facts.

<sup>12</sup> On the "nominalism" of exchange value, see David Hawkes, *Idols of the Marketplace: Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in English Literature, 1580-1680* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); for an insightful reading of Bunyan in this context, see ch. 9, "John Bunyan's One-Dimensional Man."



commodities” (115).<sup>13</sup> As Bunyan makes clear in *Badman*, “force” could come in more subtle forms than the strong hand of the law.

And thus was Mr. *Badman* an Extortioner; for although he did not exact, and force away, as *Bailifs* and *Clarks* have used to doe; yet he had his opportunities, and such cruelty to make use of them, that he would often, in his way, be Extorting, and forcing money out of his Neighbours pocket. For every man that makes a prey of his advantage upon his neighbours necessities, to force from him more than in reason and conscience, according to the present prizes of things such comodity is worth; may very well be called an Extortioner, and Judged for one that hath *No* inheritance in the Kingdom of God. (108)

Market relations could enact their own kinds of violence. As Mr. Wiseman remarks in this text, in “laying aside good conscience” in matters of exchange, one was “mak[ing] a prey” of one’s neighbor for gain—taking advantage of his ignorance, his need, and his “fondness” or affections and appetite (111). The same considerations apply to buying as to selling, and indeed to borrowing and lending. Those who make a prey of their neighbor in exchange have, in fact, been given gifts of professional knowledge and skill that they have turned into weapons.

But what! canst thou think, that God has given thee this, that thou mightest thereby goe beyond and beguile thy neighbour? No, verily; but he hath given thee it, for *his* help; that thou mightest in *this*, be eyes to the blind, and save thy neighbour from that dammage, that his *ignorance*, or *necessity*, or *fondness* would betray him into the hands of. (113)

A theological economy of gift, which might elicit just dealing and mutual regard in human relationships, has been turned into an economy of getting, fueled by ingratitude and deception. As Mr. Wiseman concludes, justice, mercy, and love must rather be the rules here as elsewhere in social life. Men “ought not in their Dealing, but to do Justly and mercifully ’twixt man and man” (115). And again: “A man in dealing should as

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<sup>13</sup> John Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, ed. James F. Forrest and Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

really design his Neighbors good, profit, and advantage, as his own: For this is to exercise Charity in his dealing” (112).

For Bunyan, the critique of Restoration conformism and coercion was of a piece with the critique of market shape-shifting for unjust consumption and gain. While Fowler, as Bunyan alleged, could make use of “several Consciences,” Badman the extortionist could gloat: “I can be religious, and irreligious, I can be any thing, or nothing . . . I enjoy my self, and am Master of mine own wayes” (84-85). Bunyan’s defense of the liberty of conscience was therefore of a piece with his defense of “good” or “tender” conscience in matters economic. But beyond polemic, Bunyan sought to display in narrative terms the forms of mutuality that he thought such conscience required. In place of Hobbes’s fantasy of sovereign power and its contracted linguistic clarities, Bunyan wrote sketches for a theology of mutuality. Gifts have been given us, his Mr. Wiseman insists, that we might “help” others, “that thou mightest in *this*, be eyes to the blind, and save thy neighbour from . . . dammage.” Divine sovereignty, Christologically defined, was diffusive and self-giving; such sovereignty was not, in Bunyan’s most Christologically focused writing, a violent guarantor of unambiguous contracts, but a loving host to pilgrim fellowship, its source and goal.<sup>14</sup> As the shepherds in the

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<sup>14</sup> My remark about Bunyan resisting a Hobbesesque, voluntarist and violent guarantee of contract in his theology admittedly pushes against the grain of some of Bunyan’s articulations of predestinarian covenant theology. My claim in what follows, however, is that there are several important strands at work in Bunyan’s thought, including ones that explicitly reject such voluntarism. For an examination of Bunyan’s writing and Puritan culture more broadly that treats alienated individualism as a result of theologies of election and reprobation, see John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991). Perhaps the most influential treatment of these issues is still Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958). For a statement of Bunyan’s Christology that stresses its centrality for his vision of the Christian life, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, “The Heart of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*,” in P. N. Brooks, ed., *Reformation Principle*

Delectable Mountains announce to the rag-tag body arriving in their domains in part two of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1684): "This is a comfortable Company, you are welcome to us, for we have for the *Feeble*, as for the *Strong*; our Prince has an Eye to what is done to the least of these. Therefore Infirmary must not be a block to our Entertainment" (284).<sup>15</sup> Bunyan in this vein seems to rearticulate strands of the teaching of Holy Church in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, a teacher who proclaims a Christological redefinition of power ("myhte") as the "souerayne salue" of love, the plant of peace that heaven could not hold, "Til it hadde of erthe ygoten hitsilue" (I.146-50). This "souerayne" power was a "myhte" that issued in meekness and mercy, and that forgave violence rather than enacted it (I.159-70). As will become clear in what follows, accordingly, the writer whose work I explore here prompts a critical reassessment not only of what has sometimes been seen narrowly as Bunyan's own "individualism," but also of the origins of modern liberal individualism itself and of the political and economic orders that claim both to guarantee it and, following Hobbes, to contain it.

### **Bunyan, Latitude, and the Hobbesian Disciplines of Modernity**

Among the more striking and pointed charges in Bunyan's *A Defence of the Doctrine of Justification, by Faith in Jesus Christ* is that Edward Fowler, whose *Design of*

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*and Practice: Essays in Honour of Arthur Geoffrey Dickens* (London: Scholar Press, 1980), 228-39.

<sup>15</sup> Throughout, quotations from parts one and two of *The Pilgrim's Progress* are taken from *The Pilgrim's Progress: From This World to That Which Is to Come*, eds. James Blanton Wharey and Roger Sharrock, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

*Christianity* had prompted Bunyan's spirited response, was a Hobbist.<sup>16</sup> Like Christian at last giving a "deadly thrust" to that "foul *Fiend*" Apollyon, Bunyan declares triumphantly, and with a quarter of his pages left to spare, that he has "broken the head" of Fowler's "Leviathan": "I might speak to what yet remains of falshood, in the other part of this Chapter; but having overthrown the Foundation, and broken the Head of your Leviathan; what remains falleth of it self, and dyeth of its own accord" (*PPI* 56, 60; *Defence* 95). If Bunyan's polemic was less than deadly, he surely hit a nerve.<sup>17</sup> In his "latitudinarian" manifesto to which the *Design* was a sequel, *The Principles and Practices of Certain Moderate Divines of the Church of England* (1670), Fowler had dealt head-on with charges of Hobbism. Written as a dialogue between two learned friends, Theophilus and Philatheles, *Principles and Practices* was both a wide-ranging argument for what its author regarded as a reasonable religion embodied in a moderate church polity, and a defense of those who had for such views been branded disparagingly with "the Long Name." Fowler's Philatheles lays out the "accursed Principles" of the Hobbists, allegedly shared by the latitude-men, as follows:

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<sup>16</sup> Edward Fowler, *The Design of Christianity; or, A plain Demonstration and Improvement of this Proposition, Viz., That the enduing men with Inward Real Righteousness or True Holiness, was the Ultimate End of our Saviour's Coming into the World, and is the Great Intendment of His Blessed Gospel* (London, 1671). For discussion of the Fowler-Bunyan controversy, see Isabel Rivers, "Grace, Holiness, and the Pursuit of Happiness: Bunyan and Restoration Latitudinarianism," in N. H. Keeble, ed., *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 45-69; Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study in the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chs. 2-3; C. Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man*, ch. 12; and Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 278-86 and 317-22.

<sup>17</sup> For contemporary charges of Hobbism against the latitudinarians, made by nonconformists and high churchmen alike, see John Marshall, "The Ecclesiology of the Latitude-men 1660-1689: Stillingfleet, Tillotson and 'Hobbism,'" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 407-27.

That all Moral righteousness is founded in the law of the Civil Magistrate:  
That the holy Scriptures are obliging by vertue onely of a Civil Sanction:  
That whatsoever Magistrates command, their Subjects are bound to submit  
to, notwithstanding contrary to Divine Moral laws. (13)

Yet such principles, Theophilus responds, “were never more solidly confuted, than by these men” (14). After all, the sort of theological voluntarism that Theophilus says so often characterized the views of the latitudinarians’ adversaries might be seen as subtly enabling both nonconformist antinomianism and the Hobbists’ most authoritarian claims for civil power (cf. 15). Against this sort of voluntarism, latitudinarians like Fowler sought to recover the “eternal Reason, why that which is good should be so and required, and why that which is evil should be so and forbidden; which depends not so much on the divine will as the divine nature” (13). Given what to these “persons of great Moderation” seemed an obviously admirable agenda, whose main contentions were simply that “the grand designe of the Gospel is to make men good” and that there is an “intrinsick” connection between holiness and happiness, Fowler’s dialogue partners express bafflement at how they could ever have stirred up any opposition in the first place (21, 18). Fowler could indeed write beautifully about how the end of the moral life was that we might be “partakers of the Divine nature” (*Principles and Practices* 122). “Grace is Glory begun,” he remarks in a kind of motto, “and Glory is grace perfected” (*Design* 125). In the *Design*, Fowler quotes the Cambridge Platonist John Smith on the sheer gift of divine love, the transcendent ground and source of all existence: “As Plato sometimes speaks of the Divine Love, it ariseth not out of Indigency, as created love doth, but out of Fulness and Redundancy: It is an overflowing fountain . . . a free efflux from the Almighty source of love” (132). What was not to like?

Bunyan's suspicions about a sharper edge to Fowler's project of reasonable religion and comprehensionist moderation were not, however, unfounded. Vicar of Northill, Bedfordshire at the time of Bunyan's controversy with him, Fowler had been chaplain to the dowager countess of Kent and a Presbyterian, but he conformed at the Restoration and so retained the benefice he had held since 1656. He would go on to become bishop of Gloucester in 1691. Bunyan was quick to seize on Fowler's history, putting him among those "ignorant Sir *Johns* . . . that have done Violence to their former Light" and "made Shipwrack of their former Faith," people better characterized by an "Unstable Weathercock Spirit" than "good Conscience" (*Defence* 82-83). Bunyan thought he saw Fowler's professional history recapitulated in his apologetics for the Restoration settlement. While Fowler explicitly sought to distance himself from "Hobbist" aggrandizements of civil power, he also had Theophilus explain in *Principles and Practices* that the latitude-men "believe the Civil Magistrate to have a Power, both Legislative and Judiciary, as well in *Sacred*, as in *Civil Affairs*" (325). Philatheles remarks that "this will not be admitted by many *Protestants*, any more than by the *Papists* themselves," and Theophilus acknowledges as much but says that such cavilling can only be due to "ignorance." In the *Design*, Fowler describes his project of "promot[ing] the business of Holiness in the world" as like good "service to a Prince": and was it not better service, he asks, "to reduce Rebels to their Allegiance, than to procure a pardon under his Seal for them" (127)? As Bunyan rightly discerned, Fowler was keen to dispute doctrines of imputed righteousness and justification by faith that he thought bred unruly antinomianism.<sup>18</sup> Surely, Fowler insists, God our "absolute

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<sup>18</sup> For a brief account of English debates about justification, see J. Wayne Baker, "*Sola Fide, Sola Gratia*: The Battle for Luther in Seventeenth-Century England," *The Sixteenth Century*

Sovereign” is more concerned with the recovery of his “right” to be obeyed than with “delivering wicked Rebels from the mischiefs and miseries they have made themselves lyable to, by their disobedience” (128)? When he gets to spelling out the implications for ecclesiastical discipline in the English church of the great “design” of the gospel “to make men holy,” Fowler forecasts a post-civil wars English future free of such pardoned rebels, or at least of their mischief:

And ‘tis easie to shew that if the Laws of all Christian churches were framed and the execution of them directed *onely*, or *above any other*, to the service of this Design . . . we should quickly see Christendome in most lovely and blessed Circumstances. All people that have any thing of sincerity, would quickly unite and agree together, and as for factious Hypocrites they would be with ease suppress, and put out of all capacity of doing mischief. This I say might be easily shewn, and plainly demonstrated; but it needs not, there being nothing in the world more undeniably evident. (*Design* 266)

When Fowler or his curate, who penned an anonymous response to Bunyan’s *Defence* called *Dirt Wip’t Off* (1672), dealt once more directly with the charge of Hobbism, he had such discipline in mind: “What thinkest thou now, Reader, canst thou fancy the Design of Christianity to be another Leviathan? or rather art thou able to retain any *tolerable* opinion of that man that calls it so, and represents it as such a piece of monstrous Devilism” (16)? For the writer of *Dirt Wip’t Off*, Bunyan was “as rank and Ranting an Antinomian as ever foul’d paper” (17). “I appeal now to *Authority*,” he concludes, “whether this man ought to enjoy any interest in his Majesties *Toleration* . . . And whether letting such *Fire-brands*, and most impudent malicious Schmismaticks go unpunish’t, doth not tend to the subversion of *all* Government. I say, let our *Superiours*

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*Journal* 16.1 (1985): 115-33. On Bunyan’s place in these debates, see Roger Pooley, “Bunyan and the Antinomians,” in Vera J. Camden, ed., *Trauma and Transformation: The Political Progress of John Bunyan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 120-34.

judge of this” (70). In a moment of exasperation with the “brutish barkings” of “so very dirty a Creature” as Bunyan, in particular his stubborn biblicism, the writer explodes: “how came such a piece of *nothing* as thou art to be so highly conceited of thine own judgment” (Preface, 54)?<sup>19</sup>

Responding to work by John Marshall and Mark Goldie on the use of Hobbes by some Anglican divines, including so-called latitudinarians like Fowler, Richard Tuck has shown some important changes in Hobbes’s thought from *De Cive* to *Leviathan*.<sup>20</sup> In his early works, Tuck argues, Hobbes was “a reasonably orthodox Anglican,” and this orthodoxy aligned with Hobbes’s early advocacy for legal sanctions against heresy beyond the bounds established by Nicea (162). “All this changes,” however, “in *Leviathan*, and the change was the principal occasion for the hostility harbored toward Hobbes after 1651 by many Anglicans who had been his close friends earlier and who

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<sup>19</sup> Fowler declares his markedly Erastian, if not strictly Hobbist, bona fides when in *Principles and Practices* he provides a brief genealogy of “the Authority of Civil Power,” unabated from Moses to contemporary princes. At last Fowler refers his reader to Samuel Parker’s *A Discourse of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1670), where, Theophilus says, “you may find this Subject excellently, and more fully handled” (326). Parker, an Erastian and a fierce opponent of dissenters, had written his *Discourse* with the express intent to reveal “the palpable inconsistency of Fanatique Tempers and Principles with the Welfare and security of Government” and so “to awaken Authority to beware of its worst and most dangerous Enemies, and to force them to that Modesty and Obedience by severity of Laws, to which all the strength of Reason in the World can never perswade them.” See Parker, *A Discourse of Ecclesiastical Politie: Wherein the Authority of the Civil Magistrate over the Consciences of Subjects in Matters of Religion Is Asserted; The Mischiefs and Inconveniences of Toleration are Represented, and All Pretences Pleaded in Behalf of Liberty of Conscience are Fully Answered*, xii. On Fowler and Parker, see Marshall, “Ecclesiology of the Latitude-men,” 427. The prominent Presbyterian Richard Baxter, whom the writer of *Dirt Wip’t Off* appealed to against Bunyan’s *Defence*, and who had himself written a pamphlet in response to Fowler’s *Design of Christianity*, endorsed the Fowlerian charge of “antinomianism” against Bunyan, but with a favorable qualification: “*Bunnian*, an unlearned Antinomian-Anabaptist, wrote against the foresaid book of Dr. *Fowler*; yet (abating his separation) I never heard that *Bunnian* was not an honest Godly man. If then he attained the design of Christianity, was he not a Christian?” See Baxter, *A Defence of Christ, and Free Grace* (London, 1690), 49.

<sup>20</sup> See Tuck, “Hobbes and Locke on Toleration.”



had admired his first books” (163). “There is nothing in [Hobbes’s] writings,” Tuck maintains, “to suggest that he favored comprehension on the basis of the Nicene Creed (the same basis proposed for the comprehensive church in 1667-68), and much to suggest that he would have been bitterly opposed to it” (166). By *Leviathan* Hobbes had emerged as a “radical tolerationist,” who made “remarkably similar” policy proposals to Locke’s, “in the shape of unpublished advice to ministers of Charles II urging (in effect) the Independent point of view” (167, 157). “*Leviathan*,” Tuck concludes, “was a book that sought to persuade its readers of two things: First, that there was no source of moral or religious judgment in a commonwealth independent of the sovereign; and second, that the very lack of such a source implied toleration” (169).

Tuck’s argument is helpful in underscoring the differences that could emerge between arguments for “toleration” and accounts of “conscience” and its proper liberties, like Bunyan’s.<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, Hobbes’s subordination of judgment to that “*Mortall God*” who ensures for each commonwealth “Peace at home, and mutual ayd against . . . enemies abroad,” means by definition that conscience has in important respects become parochialized, its judgments made coterminous with territorial sovereignty (*Lev.*, II, ch. 17, p. 108).<sup>22</sup> Pressing this point in the *Leviathan*, Hobbes imagines the following objections:

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<sup>21</sup> For a careful article responding to Tuck that examines the relationship between Hobbes and Independency more fully, see Johann Sommerville, “Hobbes and Independency,” in Luc Foisneau and George Wright, eds., *Nuove Prospettive Critiche sul “Leviatano” di Hobbes* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2004), 155-73. For suggestive remarks on toleration versus liberty of conscience, see too C. Hill, “Tolerance in Seventeenth-Century England: Theory and Practice.”

<sup>22</sup> A corollary point is that judgment in Hobbes has also, more literally, been *de-parochialized* in being nationalized, and so removed in important ways from local contexts. For fascinating treatments of judgment in such local contexts in seventeenth-century England, see Keith Wrightson, “The ‘Decline of Neighbourliness’ Revisited,” in Norman L. Jones and Daniel

But what (may some object) if a King, or a Senate, or other Sovereign Person forbid us to beleeeve in Christ. To this I answer, that such forbidding is of no effect; because Beleef, and Unbeleef never follow mens Commands. Faith is a gift of God, which Man can neither give, nor take away by promise of rewards, or menaces of torture. And if it be further asked, What if we bee commanded by our lawfull Prince, to say with our tongue, wee beleeeve not; must we obey such command? Profession with the tongue is but an externall thing . . . whatsoever a subject . . . is compelled to in obedience to his Sovereign, and doth it not in order to his own mind, but in order to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his Sovereigns; nor is it he that in this case denyeth Christ before men, but his Governour, and the law of his countrey. If any man shall accuse this doctrine, as repugnant to true, and unfeigned Christianity; I ask him, in case there should be a subject in any Christian Common-wealth, that should be inwardly in his heart of the Mahometan Religion, whether if his Sovereign command him to bee present at the divine service of the Christian Church, and that on pain of death, he think that Mahometan obliged in conscience to suffer death for that cause, rather than to obey that command of his lawfull Prince. If he say, he ought rather to suffer death, then he authorizeth all private men, to disobey their Princes, in maintenance of their Religion, true, or false: if he say, he ought to bee obedient, then he alloweth to himself, that which he denyeth to another, contrary to the words of our Saviour, *Whatsoever you would that men should doe unto you, that doe yee unto them*; and contrary to the Law of Nature, (which is the indubitable everlasting Law of God) *Do not to another, that which thou wouldest not he should doe unto thee*. (Lev., III, ch. 42, pp. 330-31)

Hobbes's imagined objections and his responses take to task English Christian hypocrisy over conscience and its relationship to tolerance of those with complex allegiances. How were contemporary advocates of conscience on all sides prepared to acknowledge a Muslim conscience? Yet Hobbes himself assumes rather than argues a position on whether the conscience-claim in question is "true, or false." And beyond that, his

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Woolf, eds., *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 19-49; Wrightson, "Mutualities and Obligations: Changing Social Relationships in Early Modern England," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 139 (2006): 157-94; and Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

position is clear enough: judgment, the action it commends, and one's responsibility for both are decisively outsourced to one's sovereign and his laws.<sup>23</sup>

It is here that the substance of Bunyan's charge of Hobbism against Fowler begins to become apparent. When Fowler in his *Design* comes to the question of "the *Just bounds and extent of our Christian Liberty*," he argues that whatever things are "necessary" to the furtherance of the design of Christianity as he has explained it "must needs be a matter of strict duty," and their neglect "absolutely unlawful" (240-41). All things "*indifferent* under the Gospel" are then left to our liberty (242). This sphere of liberty turns out, however, itself to be carefully circumscribed:

And therefore whatsoever of such are commended by the Custome of the places we live in, or Comanded by Superiors, or made by any Circumstance convenient to be done; our Christian liberty consists in this, that we have leave to do them. And, indeed, it is so far from being a sin to comply with our Country-men and Neighbours in their plainly innocent usages and harmless Customes, or with the will of our Governours when they command us such things; that it would be so, to refuse so to do. For our refusing to comply with either of these can hardly proceed from any thing better than a proud affectation of singularity, or at best from superstitious scrupulosity; which, in calling it *Superstitious*, I intimate to be very evil, as much of Conscience as there may be in it. (*Design* 242)

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<sup>23</sup> John Marshall points to Hobbes's "incoherence" here, since Hobbes claims elsewhere that a rebel against sovereign authority was "author of his own punishment" by the sovereign *and* that somehow, here, this "externall thing" of profession with the tongue against one's convictions was not one's own action, but that of the sovereign. But this seems to me, rather, a (troubling) consistency, since when one is operating within the terms of the social contract, one's actions are mystically identified with the sovereign power that guarantees that contract; whereas as soon as you step outside the bounds of that contract, and retreat to a state of nature, your actions are "your own" in what was, for Hobbes, the worst sense. See Marshall, "The Ecclesiology of the Latitude-Men," 422. Victoria Kahn has noted that Hobbes explicitly allied what he saw as the dangerous illusions of "conscience" with vainglory and its cultivation in romantic quest narrative. These links seem to me of a piece with the extreme care Hobbes takes in *Leviathan* around defining martyrdom. For a discussion of Hobbes's critique of romance, see Kahn, *Wayward Contracts*, ch. 6 (here esp. 146-47). For relevant reflections on martyrdom in Hobbes, see D. Stephen Long and Geoffrey Holdsclaw, "Is Anything Worth Dying For?: Martyrdom, Exteriority, and Politics after Bare Life," in Michael L. Budde and Karen Scott, eds., *Witness of the Body: The Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 171-89.

As Bunyan surely knew, the language Fowler invokes here of “indifference,” “custom,” “command,” and “convenience” was highly politically charged. As Fowler’s Theophilus insists in *Principles and Practices*, for example, “those that are under Authority ought to judge for themselves what is *lawful*; yet it is most unreasonable, that the judgment of what is *convenient*, should not be left to their Governors” (330). What was “indifferent” and merely “convenient” could be left to civil authorities to adjudicate, and those under their authority “had leave” to act accordingly. But given licit custom or sovereign command, it was “sin”—nothing more than “a proud affectation of singularity, or at best . . . superstitious scrupulosity”—not to comply. Early in the *Design*, Fowler had also used the language of “indifference” to describe those duties emerging from the “*Arbitrary Will* of God,” the “*Positive Laws*” of the gospel that “absolutely considered” were “neither Good, nor Evil” according to the moral law written in the hearts of all (7-9). Among such “things . . . of an indifferent nature,” Fowler lists the ceremonial laws of Hebrew scripture, and in the New Testament, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and “going to God by Christ.” On this latter point, which he made insisting on its Reformed pedigree, Fowler explains that God “could have pardoned sin without any other Satisfaction than the Repentance of the Sinner,” but chose otherwise (84). So “coming to God by Christ” was a thing “indifferent” to the moral law “absolutely considered.”

In the *Defence*, Bunyan seizes on this language of “indifference,” returning to it repeatedly throughout the book, especially Fowler’s statement that “coming to God by Christ” was a thing indifferent. The writer of *Dirt Wip’t Off* realized this was a major point of contention and no mere quibble, but he insisted that Bunyan had either clumsily missed the subtlety of Fowler’s usage of the word in this context or was simply being

willfully provocative and slanderous (*Dirt* 24-26, 43, 53-54). Yet whatever Bunyan's ignorance about the contingency or necessity of Christ's incarnation and passion as this question had been addressed in academic theology from the later Middle Ages to his own time, Bunyan's ear was understandably pricked for Fowler's sense of what was "indifferent," since as he rightly discerned, this was a sphere Fowler explicitly gave over to civil power, its judgments about "convenience" and its commands.<sup>24</sup> Bunyan's response to Fowler on this point takes us back to Hobbes's questions about the Muslim subject facing a legal obligation to worship against his conscience.

So that do but call them things indifferent, things that are the customs of the place we live in, or made by ANY Circumstance convenient, and a man may not doubt but he hath leave to do them, let him live at *Rome*, or *Constantinople*, or amidst the greatest Corruption of Worship and Government. These are therefore doubtless, a *Third* sort of Fundamentals, by which you can *Wrastle* with Conviction of Conscience, and stifle it; by which you can suit yourself for every Fashion, Mode, and Way of Religion. Here you may hop from Presbyterianism, to a Prelatical Mode; and if time and chance should serve you, backwards, and forwards again: Yea, here you can make use of several Consciences, one for this way now, another for that anon; now putting out the Light of this by a Sophistical Delusive Argument, then putting out the other, by an argument that best suits the time. . . . How then, if God should cast you into *Turky*, where *Mahomet* Reigns as *Lord*? It is but reckoning that it is the Religion, and Custome of the Country, and that which is Authorized by the Power that is there; wherefore it is but sticking to your Dictates of Humane Nature, and remembering that coming to God by Christ is a thing of an *indifferent* Nature in it self, and then for peace sake, and to sleep in a whole skin, you may comply, and do as your Superiour commands. . . . Behold you here then (good Reader) a glorious Latitudinarian, that can, as to Religion, turn and twist like an Eel on the Angle; or rather like the Weather-cock that stands on the Steeple. (*Defence* 101-102)

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<sup>24</sup> For an engaging recent treatment of medieval views of the Incarnation as *conveniens* (Aquinas) and "behovely" (Julian of Norwich), see Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), ch. 7. For Bunyan as a "radical antiformalist," as distinguished from a latitudinarian antiformalism that widened the sphere of *adiaphora* or "things indifferent" only to locate them under civil power, see J. C. Davis, "Against Formality: One Aspect of the English Revolution," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth ser., vol. 3 (1993): 265-88.

No more than Hobbes, of course, is Bunyan here advocating for toleration of Muslims—indeed, Hobbes’s argument can be seen as a kind of backhanded advocacy for Muslim “conscience” in its own (foreign) sphere of civil sovereignty. Yet Bunyan is a critic here of Hobbes’s account of the Muslim conscience. Where Hobbes imagines a Muslim subject in England and questions his obligations, insisting on his duty to obey sovereign authority in practice if not in thought, Bunyan imagines Fowler abroad in Turkey, and questions his willingness to adapt himself to “time and chance” and sovereign power, which Bunyan alleges are Fowler’s actual authorities, at home as Bunyan suggests they would likewise be abroad. Bunyan did not take Hobbes’s line of splitting minds and bodies. Indeed, we note here *Hobbes’s* relegation of conscience to an interior space (“inwardly in his heart of the Mahometan Religion”), while Bunyan’s language figures conscience in stubbornly bodily terms. Bunyan’s metaphors return us to an embodied life that Hobbes’s interiorizations conceal, with responsibility on Hobbes’s account displaced and sublimated to an abstracted sphere of sovereign power. Given his own terms, Bunyan might well answer Hobbes that yes, the Muslim in question was bound to disobey the injunction to worship against his conscience. Punishment, after all, was a lesser evil than to “*Wrastle* with Conviction of Conscience, and stifle it.”

Bunyan’s comments here likewise bespeak a subtly critical reading of Fowler’s use of natural law (“your Dictates of Human Nature”) in his account of civil power, as of Hobbes’s. Making a sharply *ad hominem* attack on Fowler’s own choice at the Restoration to “hop from Presbyterianism, to a Prelatical Mode,” Bunyan extends the point to ask about different forms of sovereign authority. What was it, precisely, that determined political obligation? What were the moral limits to civil authority, and how

might these be discerned? Who could be entrusted with such a task of discernment, and what forums might exist for giving voice to such inquiries? More than simply a jibe about perceived self-serving conformity, Bunyan's remark that Fowler had made use of "several Consciences" extends to substantive questions about the content and authority of conscience under different cultural and political conditions. Elsewhere Bunyan shows clear evidence that he himself had wrestled with questions about cross-cultural difference and what such difference might mean for his own most deeply held convictions. In his spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666; rev. ca. 1672), he recalls such wrestling:

The Tempter would also much assault me with this: How can you tell but that the Turks had as good Scriptures to prove their *Mahomet* the Saviour, as we have to prove our *Jesus* is; and could I think that so many ten thousands in so many Countreys and Kingdoms, should be without the knowledge of the right way to Heaven (if there were indeed a Heaven) and that we onely, who live but in a corner of the Earth, should alone be blessed therewith? Everyone doth think his own Religion rightest, both *Jews*, and *Moors*, and *Pagans*; and how if all our Faith, and Christ, and Scriptures, should be but a think-so too (§97, p. 33)?<sup>25</sup>

In recalling these thoughts in *Grace Abounding*, Bunyan disavows their grip on him in the present—or rather, utters them in the form of confession so as to disavow them. Yet capable of such "wrestling" himself, Bunyan was a skeptical reader of Fowler's "Dictates of Humane Nature" and the ethics and politics they produced. For as he argues bitinglly, "sticking" to these dictates seemed to issue for Fowler not in "Conviction of Conscience," but a principled defense of convenience.

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<sup>25</sup> *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London: Oxford University Press, 1966). In *Grace Abounding*, Bunyan links his early encounter with skepticism to Ranter books and acquaintances. On the Ranters, see Nigel Smith, *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Junction Books, 1983).

In this respect it is clear that Bunyan's skepticism was tactical, subordinate to a more determinative moral realism. Bunyan was not, that is, a skeptic about natural law as such, or about a substantive common good beyond the articulation of present individual or collective interest. Here, as David Hawkes has argued, Bunyan was a prescient if unlikely critic of Hobbes and the budding seventeenth- and eighteenth-century science of political economy that operated on Hobbesian assumptions.<sup>26</sup> Hobbes himself strongly disavowed the Thomistic-Aristotelian ethics of "the Schooles," according to which value was responsive to an antecedent natural order intending human flourishing, and not simply determined by the contingencies of self-interested appetite construed as "natural."<sup>27</sup> As Hobbes asserts, "there is no . . . *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers" (*Lev.* I, ch. 11, p. 59). The will was bare appetite, not a rational appetite as Aquinas had argued: "The Definition of Will, given commonly by the Schooles, that it is a *Rationall Appetite*, is not good. . . . a *Voluntary Act* is that, which proceedeth from the *Will*, and no other" (*Lev.*, I, ch. 6, p. 33). The schoolmen, Hobbes remarks, had written "As if it were Injustice to sell dearer than we buy; or to give more to a man than he merits," but this was "not right": instead, "The value of all things contracted for, is

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<sup>26</sup> See David Hawkes, *Idols of the Marketplace*, ch. 9.

<sup>27</sup> For an illuminating recent study of Aristotelian economic teaching as received and adapted by Aquinas, see Christopher A. Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas's Economic Teachings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). As Franks writes: "Market society produces a construal of nature in which what is archaic is the individual's claim for security rather than the fabric of a natural and social membership. What Aristotle's analysis helps us see is that the priority of this individual claim is not a necessary anthropological phenomenon but is linked with the ascendancy of exchange value" (52-53). Here see too Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), ch. 5.



measured by the Appetite of the Contractors: and therefore the just value, is that which they are contented to give” (*Lev.*, I, ch. 15, pp. 92-93). This latter point comes in a chapter of the *Leviathan* devoted to “Other Lawes of Nature,” the “Science” of which was “the true and onely Moral Philosophy: For Morall Philosophy is nothing else but the Science of what is *Good*, and *Evill*, in the conversation, and Society of man-kind.” And “*Good*, and *Evill*,” for Hobbes, are after all “names that signify our Appetites, and Aversions” (*Lev.*, I, ch. 15, p. 98).

In *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, Bunyan disputes precisely this point about value and its determination sheerly by contract. Attentive, one of the book’s two principal dialogue partners, remarks to Wiseman, his interlocutor, “you seem to import that it is not lawful for a man to make the best of his own” (110). “If by making the best,” Wiseman responds, “you mean, to sell for as much as by *hook* or *crook* he can get for his comodity; then I say, *it is not lawful*.” To do so would be “to lay aside in my dealing with others, good conscience, to them, and to God,” and to make a prey of one’s neighbor. This was pure self-seeking, and it hardened one’s heart “against all reasonable entreaties of the buyer” (112). Such endeavors would necessarily involve one in unjust habits of speech, “Lying, Swearing, Cursing, and Cheating”(113). This kind of behavior was an abuse of God’s good gifts and “offereth violence to the law of Nature: for that saith, *Doe unto all men, even as ye would that they should do unto you*.” Attentive goes on to ask the question of what precisely might determine price in just terms, noting that “there is no settled price set by God upon any Commodity that is bought or sold under the Sun; but all things that we buy and sell, do ebbe and flow, as to price, like the Tide” (115). Wiseman concedes the point, but explains that the question itself, though

admittedly a “difficult” one, was increasingly thought “frivolous by all that are of Mr. *Badmans* way.”<sup>28</sup> Wiseman proceeds then to lay out a practical discipline for keeping a “good conscience” in buying and selling, a discipline that includes habits of discernment of one’s own and others’ needs, and truthful speech (116-118). Bunyan satirizes Badman in terms of a different discipline, one that resonates with his critique of Fowler as a “hopping” and “wrestling” Hobbist.

Nay, he was so far off from reluctancies and remorse of Conscience for these things [i.e., tricking a woman to marry him for her money, deceiving his creditors, etc.], that he counted them the excellency of his Attainments, the quintessence of his Wit, his rare and singular vertues, such as but few besides himself could be the Masters of. Therefore, as for those that made boggle and stop at things, and that could not in Conscience, and for fear of Death and Judgment, do such things as he; he would call them Fools and Noddies, and charge them for being frighted with the talk of unseen Bug-bears; and would encourage them, if they would be men indeed, to labour after the attainment of this his excellent art. He would often-times please himself with the thoughts of what he could do in this matter, saying within himself, I can be religious, and irreligious, I can be any thing, or nothing; I can swear, and speak against swearing; I can lye, and speak against lying; I can drink, wench, be unclean, and defraud, and not be troubled for it: Now I enjoy my self, and am Master of mine own wayes, and not they of me. This I have attained with much study, great care, and more pains. (84-85)

Here even self-reflection is reduced to an obsessive pursuit of self-aggrandizement.

Badman’s “art” was a severe discipline, but it held the promise of power and comfort. As

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<sup>28</sup> William York Tindall seems to echo Wiseman’s remark when he calls Bunyan’s economic ethics “outmoded” in his own time, “the last moral vestiges of the Middle Ages” to be found in seventeenth-century England. See William York Tindall, *John Bunyan: Mechanick Preacher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 111-12; Tindall relies on G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* [1933] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961). On Bunyan and medieval ethics, see too the classic study by R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* [1926] (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2005); T. L. Underwood’s introduction to Bunyan’s *A Few Sighs from Hell* in *Miscellaneous Works*, vol. 1, Underwood and Roger Sharrock, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), xxxv-lvi; Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628-1688* (New York: Knopf, 1989); and Hawkes, *Idols of the Marketplace*.

David Hawkes writes of Bunyan's satire of such shape-shifting, in light of the tacit predetermination of Badman's ways as "an allegorical personification of badness": "The implication is that the social mobility and theatrical shifts in identity that a market economy facilitates are in reality masks, fantasies which disguise the deeper predetermination of the character of market participants" (*Idols* 229). Against Hobbes's "natural laws" of self-interest, Bunyan protests that "making the best of one's own" was an artifice that in fact took "much study, great care, and more pains" to master.<sup>29</sup>

Hobbes's revisionist account of conscience in terms of the social contract came with its own forms of discipline. Hobbes insisted here on a self-consciously modernizing discipline, based in part in his sense that the Reformation had decisively rendered the universality of the church an obsolete fiction.

It followeth also, that there is on Earth, no such universall Church, as all Christians are bound to obey; because there is no power on Earth, to which all other Common-wealths are subject: There are Christians, in the Dominions of severall Princes and States; but every one of them is subject to that Common-wealth, whereof he is himself a member . . . . *Temporall* and *Spirituell* Government, are but two words brought into the world, to make men see double, and mistake their *Lawfull Sovereign*. . . . There is . .

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<sup>29</sup> In an interesting study, Lori Branch's account of Bunyan's theology as contractual and so as "symptomatic" of commodity culture—with *The Pilgrim's Progress* indeed as "the salvation of commodity culture"—is overwrought and neglects major strands of Bunyan's thought, such as I have been pursuing here. See *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006), esp. chs. 1-2. Bunyan's critique of Badman's shape-shifting, on a level with what he alleges to be Fowler's use of "several Consciences," also points to the inadequacies of Jennifer Herdt's account of Bunyan in her fine study, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); for Bunyan, see ch. 7. Although Herdt tracks some important strands in what she sees as "hyper-Augustinian" anxieties over the acquisition of virtue, resulting in an early modern displacement of virtue ethics, Bunyan's criticisms about hypocrisy were not, as Herdt argues they were, simply the result of an overweening anxiety about assurance of salvation. As a closer reading across several of Bunyan's works reveals, these criticisms were more seriously to do with what Bunyan saw as the *instrumentalization* of religion for ends external to it. The ties here to the dramatic changes in sovereign power Bunyan witnessed in his own lifetime should help us see the acuity of this critique. I return to Herdt's study below.

. no Government in this life, neither of State, nor Religion, but Temporall; nor teaching of any doctrine, lawfull to any Subject, which the Governour both of the State, and of the Religion, forbiddeth to be taught: And that Governour must be one; or else there must needs follow Faction, and Civil war in the Commonwealth, between the *Church* and *State*; between *Spiritualists*, and *Temporalists*; between the *Sword of Justice*, and the *Shield of Faith*; and (which is more) in every Christian mans own brest, between the *Christian*, and the *Man*. (*Lev.*, III, ch. 39, pp. 308-309)

Modernity meant that “faction” and the “double vision” it emerged from had to be chased from “every Christian mans own brest.” Here was a forthright rebuff to the formulation of conscience that Augustine had given in *The City of God*, where he suggests that Christian *conscientia* involves a peculiar alterity, an ironic distance from the forms of praise and blame, reward and punishment, that are determinative in any earthly order (cf. *DCD* 14.28). Such alterity, as Augustine explored so exquisitely in the *Confessions*, extends even to oneself, in flashes of uncomfortable insight that can feel as much like self-estrangement as self-knowledge. Closer to Hobbes’s own moment, Bunyan offers a complex response to Hobbes’s imagined modernity. As we have seen, he criticizes Fowler as a “Hobbist,” though Fowler himself argued, with some justice, that his project was one of articulating the rationality of Christian faith, and as such was an express confutation of various Hobbesian principles about moral and political order.<sup>30</sup> Bunyan read Fowler’s account of rationality skeptically, arguing that it masked deeper determinations and accommodations to contingent forms of sovereignty and custom. Along these lines, arguing from a committed realism about moral value, Bunyan was

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<sup>30</sup> In ways I have not been able to detail here, Fowler clearly saw his project as a sort of *ressourcement*, drawing on patristic sources from Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa to more contemporary writers like the Counter-Reformation thinker Catharinus and the Cambridge Platonist (and critic of Hobbes) Ralph Cudworth. Fowler also lingered with questions of liberty and conscience, perhaps with some memory of his encounter with Bunyan: see his *Libertas Evangelica: or, A Discourse of Christian Liberty, Being a farther Pursuance of the Argument of The Design of Christianity* (London, 1680); on conscience, see esp. 223ff.

likewise a critic of market values and practices that could seem all too “natural.” As his Wiseman remarks in *Badman*: “’Tis not custom, but good conscience that will help at Gods Tribunal” (106). In these ways Bunyan was drawing deeply, if without learned academic reference, on the Janus-face of conscience as it had been understood in a tradition that Aquinas articulated with such force and subtlety: conscience not only as morally binding judgment, but also as judgment that was given to error and that required formation, instruction, friendship, and one’s own introspection. If Bunyan was a critic of Hobbes’s imagined modernity, it was not simply in the name of the “sovereignty” of individual conscience. The ironies of conscience, Bunyan sought to show, were dependent on concrete forms of mutuality, including communal discernment. In what follows I turn to Bunyan’s most sustained treatment of these themes, in part two of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

### **Mercy and Memory in *The Pilgrim’s Progress***

The most culturally iconic images from Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* are surely ones of urgent departure—Christian, for example, turning reading into running, fingers plugged in his ears to the voices of family, friends, and neighbors behind.

So I saw in my Dream, that the Man began to run; Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return: but the Man put his fingers in his Ears, and ran on crying, Life, Life, Eternal Life: so he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the Plain. (*PPI*, 10).

Or again, as in Blake’s watercolor of the man in rags, absorbed in his book, with a grotesque burden on his back, pressing him to the ground like a giant, menacing thumb: the forces that represent staying put, lingering with loved ones, waiting for meaning to

unfold further, recalling the past—or even looking up—are cast under a demonic shadow. The point was to flee the flames that flickered ominously behind.<sup>31</sup>

In Langland's *Piers Plowman*, vision emerges differently. The poem sets out with Wille, like an “unholy” hermit, going forth into the world, “wondres to here” (Pr. 1-4). Holy Church likewise begins her instruction asking Wille to look more closely at the “feld ful of folk” that he himself has emerged from:

Wille, slepestou? seestow this peple,  
Hou bisy thei ben aboute the mase?  
The moste party of this peple that passeth on this erthe,  
Haue thei worschip in this world thei wilneth no bettere;  
Of othere heuene then here thei halde no tale. (I.5-9)

Holy Church gently prods the poem's “unholy” narrator to consider what “tales” and “wondres” sustain the particular world before them, in its maze-like configurations of labor, play, love, governance, exchange, and worship. She gives Wille resources for seeing this world that the poem spends its considerable length unpacking, developing, and pressing to new limits and fields of vision. This early scene of instruction is thus a moment of estrangement, even self-estrangement, for Wille. Yet the primary image here is not one of departure so much as recollection and revision. Holy Church recalls Wille to a life and formation beyond the narrative time of the poem itself: “Holy Church Y am . . . thou oughtest me to knowe; / Y undirfenge the formeste [received you first, in baptism] and fre man the made” (I.72-73). The “peple” Holy Church points Wille's attention to here likewise return in different guises throughout *Piers Plowman*, and the

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<sup>31</sup> For Blake's illustrations of Bunyan and critical commentary, see Gerda S. Norvig, *Dark Figures in the Desired Country: Blake's Illustrations to "The Pilgrim's Progress"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

poem is nothing if not a meditation on how one's socially embodied life constitutes distinctive forms of both blindness and vision.

If we recognize that Bunyan wrote "the pilgrim's progress" more than once, we can begin to see surprising continuities in Bunyan's allegories with Langland's account of a vision profoundly informed by memory and mutuality. The first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, on this reading, is like a moment in Langland's highly dialectical *Piers Plowman*, one that Bunyan self-consciously returns to, recasts, and presses to new complexity and insight.<sup>32</sup> In part two Bunyan has to deal with changes in political circumstance, new criticism, and the surprising success of part one, with an international readership for his allegory and counterfeits both having emerged in a short span.<sup>33</sup> Yet

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<sup>32</sup> For an account of Bunyan's hermeneutics and readership as formed by a long "*Piers Plowman* tradition" in English literary and religious history, one that read Langland as a Lollard and transformed him for Protestant polemics, a focus different from my suggestions here on dialectic, see Barbara A. Johnson, *Reading "Piers Plowman" and "The Pilgrim's Progress": Reception and the Protestant Reader* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1992). As direct evidence of Bunyan's knowledge of Langland is not available—though his late epic *The Holy War* is perhaps the work most suggestive of such knowledge—Johnson's study helpfully treats Bunyan's relationship to *Piers Plowman* apart from questions of direct influence. Bunyan's knowledge of texts in the *Piers Plowman* tradition would have come from his wide reading in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church*, a text that has been seen as more a library than a book. For treatments of Bunyan's reception of Foxe, see John R. Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom in English Literature, 1563-1694* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ch. 6; and Thomas S. Freeman, "A Library in Three Volumes: Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs' in the Writings of John Bunyan," *Bunyan Studies* 5 (1994): 47-57. For accounts of Bunyan's reading and influences more generally, see Hill, *Tinker and a Poor Man*, 135-43 and 157-69; and Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, 105-109 *passim*. For a treatment of how the medieval trope of pilgrimage became central in Protestant constructions of Christian identity, including Bunyan's (but excluding Langland as a precursor), see N. H. Keeble, "'To be a pilgrim': Constructing the Protestant Life in Early Modern England," in Colin Morris and Peter Roberts, eds., *Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 238-56. For accounts of Langland as a dialectical writer, see Aers, *Sanctifying Signs*, ch. 5; and Zeeman, "*Piers Plowman*" and the Medieval Discourse of Desire.

<sup>33</sup> On Bunyan's reputation, see See C. Hill, "Bunyan's Contemporary Reputation," in Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens, and Stuart Sim, eds., *John Bunyan and His England, 1628-88* (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1990), 3-15; and N. H. Keeble, "'Of him thousands daily Sing and talk': Bunyan and His Reputation," in Keeble, ed., *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 241-63.

still more centrally, I want to argue, does Bunyan's text in part two revisit and reimagine key aspects of what counts as "pilgrimage" in the first place, and the social and theological conditions for its possibility. It has long been recognized that in part two we find a more sustained vision of the church than in part one.<sup>34</sup> Bunyan does more in part two, however, than simply populate the way to the Celestial City with a pilgrim congregation, as if to let the supporting cast take a bow in the encore of part one. In this way we can make a stronger claim about the significance of part two than John Knott's, that the "opportunity of writing another version of his basic story allowed Bunyan to elaborate on the original episodes and add new ones in such a way as to show the importance of the holy community to the individual pilgrim and to distill the essence of the life of this community."<sup>35</sup> Such formulations tend to assume a basic datum, the "individual," which the community serves and whose identity it ensures.<sup>36</sup> In my account of part two, I suggest something like the reverse: that its story of companionship and community serves as a critically imaginative investigation of the relational terms of individual agency itself. While part two ostensibly finds its plot in a retracing of the heroic steps of Christian and his companions Faithful and Hopeful in part one, the text

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<sup>34</sup> For treatments of part two that emphasize the church, see for example N. H. Keeble, "Christiana's Key: The Unity of *The Pilgrim's Progress*," in Vincent Newey, ed., *"The Pilgrim's Progress": Critical and Historical Views* (Totowa, N. J.: Barnes & Noble, 1980), 1-20; and John R. Knott, Jr., "Bunyan and the Holy Community," *Studies in Philology* 80.2 (1983): 200-25. For a wider treatment of these themes in Bunyan and nonconformist literature more generally, see Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> Knott, "Bunyan and the Holy Community," 225.

<sup>36</sup> Though elsewhere in this article Knott qualifies his account of individual pilgrim identity in terms closer to the ones I pursue here: e.g., "Christiana and Mercy cannot be understood in isolation from the group of which they are a part and the sustaining communities that they encounter along the way" (214).



uses this occasion to reenvision what is central and constitutive in “pilgrim” identity—an identity *premised* on, it turns out, not simply haphazardly extending to, practices of trust, acknowledged dependence, mutual regard, and gift-giving. One critic and more decorous counterfeiter of Bunyan’s first allegory thought there was too much laughter in part one. Bunyan responded by adding more laughter to part two, along with a bigger dose of eating, drinking, singing, and dancing.<sup>37</sup> Part two attempts to show that election meant sanctification, and sanctification both issued in and depended on “the restoration of society.”<sup>38</sup>

We can begin to see the force of this recursive quality of part two, by noting that what in part one Bunyan had given voice to only in satiric relief—for example as an ironically deflected object of others’ ridicule—in part two he reclaims as imaginatively central. We are told that when Badman was rebuked for his faults, he would reply with mockery, “that he was not arrived to a manly spirit that did stick or boggle at any wickedness” (114). Hobbes had written in a similar register not only about conscience, but of those who discovered it in covenantal terms: “But this pretence of Covenant with God, is so evident a lye, even in the pretenders own consciences, that it is not onely an act of an unjust, but also of a vile, and unmanly disposition” (*Lev.*, II, ch. 18, p. 110). Bunyan gave voice to such criticism in his figure of Shame, whom Faithful encounters in the Valley of Humiliation in part one. In a deeply moving scene, we hear Shame’s

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<sup>37</sup> A lovely brief treatment of music, festivity, and poetry in Bunyan’s writing can be found in C. Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man*, ch. 21. For Bunyan’s critic and imitator, see T. S. (presumably Thomas Sherman), *The Second Part of The Pilgrim’s Progress, from this Present World of Wickedness and Misery, to an Eternity of Holiness and Fidelity* (London, 1682).

<sup>38</sup> For this phrase and discussion of this formulation, see John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), qtd. at 96.

remarks not from Shame himself, but from the one he has attempted to shame, the one who has battled such internalizations:

What! why he objected against Religion it self; he said it was a pitiful, low, sneaking business for a man to mind Religion; he said that a tender conscience was an unmanly thing, and that for a Man to watch over his words and ways, so as to tye up himself from that hectoring liberty, that the brave spirits of the times accustom themselves unto, would make him the Ridicule of the times. He objected also, that but few of the Mighty, Rich, or Wise, were ever of my opinion; nor any of them neither, before they were perswaded to be Fools, and to be of a voluntary fondness, to venture the loss of all, *for no body else knows what*. He moreover objected the base and low estate and condition of those that were chiefly the Pilgrims; also their ignorance of the times in which they lived, and want of understanding in all natural Science. Yea, he did hold me to it at that rate also, about a great many more things then here I relate; as, that it was a *shame* to sit whining and mourning under a Sermon, and a *shame* to come sighing and groaning home. That it was a *shame* to ask my Neighbour forgiveness for petty faults, or to make restitution where I had taken from any: He said also that Religion made a man grow strange to the great, because of a few vices (which he called by finer names) and made him own and respect the base, because of the same Religious fraternity. And is not this, said he, a *shame*? (*PPI*, 72-73)

Much of what is most powerful about Bunyan's writing, to my mind, emerges from just the sort of social and psychological acuity displayed here. If, as E. P. Thompson once wrote, social class is less a "structure" or "category" than "something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships," Bunyan was far indeed from being a mere "symptom" of emergent forms of early modern individualism: he was more accurately one of the seventeenth century's most attentive and perceptive commentators on human relationships, their class formations, and what seemed to be happening to them.<sup>39</sup> Commenting on the central role of "dignity" in modern moral

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<sup>39</sup> I quote here from E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 9. For Bunyan as a (sub-Althusserian and -Lacanian) "symptom" of commodity culture, see Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity*, e.g., 87-89.

thinking, Charles Taylor links it to “our sense of ourselves as commanding (attitudinal) respect,” a sense that has everything to do with how we carry ourselves in the world.

The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, of pride or shame. Our style of movement expresses how we see ourselves as enjoying respect or lacking it, as commanding it or failing to do so. Some people flit through public space as though avoiding it, others rush through as though hoping to sidestep the issue of how they appear in it by the very serious purpose with which they transit through it; others again saunter through with assurance, savouring their moments within it; still others swagger, confident of how their presence marks it: think of the carefully leisurely way the policeman gets out of his car, having stopped you for speeding, and the slow, swaying walk over as he comes to demand your license.<sup>40</sup>

In part one of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan imagined an allegorical space in which an agonistic account of dissenting heroism—with Christian and Faithful, for example, “playing the man” as martyrs in Vanity Fair—revealed pilgrim dignity and destiny at once. In part two, he returns to Shame’s mockery that “a tender conscience was an unmanly thing.” He does so with a devastating irony, telling a story of “Religious fraternity” that “owns and respects the base” to emerge out of a female companionship that figures the church. In this way we can also see part two as an ironic riposte to the magistrate John Kelynge, who at the quarter sessions in 1661 had told Bunyan he could lawfully teach in his family, but nowhere else. Bunyan’s “calling,” Kelynge maintained, was civil, not spiritual, and so his public “gifts” could only be as a laborer. Bunyan replied then, “if it was lawful to do good to some, it was lawful to do good to more.”<sup>41</sup> In

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 15.

<sup>41</sup> See *A Relation of my Imprisonment*, printed with *Grace Abounding*, ed. Sharrock, p. 122.

part one of *The Pilgrim's Progress* Christian goes on pilgrimage without his family; in part two, the private becomes the public, biology opens out into an apostolic genealogy, and Christian's family figures the church itself on pilgrimage in the world. But Bunyan's theological vision in part two is still more penetrating, as he figures in one of these companions especially, Mercy, a Christologically-disclosive relational ethic that he shows to be at the center of his vision of dissent. In an allegory of Mercy's withholding consent to marriage, Bunyan figures the practical force of the dissenting community's act of separation, and so too the distinctive form of liberty that Bunyan takes "tender conscience" to embody.

Part two of *The Pilgrim's Progress* begins not with a scene of leaving, but one of remembering. A self-conscious sequel—in fact, counting *Badman*, which Bunyan regarded as a companion to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, this was a third installment—part two takes as its opening conceit that its narrator has collected an "account" of those "whom [Christian] left behind" when he first set out for the Celestial City, and has dreamed another dream in which this account now unfolds (174). As the dream opens, the narrator meets an old man named Mr. Sagacity. Learning that Sagacity comes from the City of Destruction, the narrator asks after the whereabouts of Christian, who some time back left this town for "the higher Regions." Sagacity replies that Christian's journey has in fact become well-known, such that "all our Countrey rings of him," with but few houses that have not sought out "the *Records* of his Pilgrimage." Sagacity goes on to report the buzz around Christian's present whereabouts.

Talk! The People talk strangely about him. Some say that he *now walks in White*, that he has a Chain of Gold about his Neck, that he has a Crown of Gold, beset with Pearls upon his Head: Others say, that the shining ones that sometimes shewed themselves to him in his Journey, are become his

Companions, and that he is as familiar with them in the place where he is, as here one Neighbour is with another. Besides, 'tis confidently affirmed concerning him, that the King of the place where he is, has bestowed upon him already a very rich and pleasant Dwelling at Court, and that he every day eateth and drinketh, and walketh, and talketh with him, and receiveth of the smiles and favours of him that is Judg of all there. Moreover, it is expected of some that his Prince, the Lord of that Countrey, will shortly come into *these* parts, and will know the reason, if they can give any, why his Neighbours set so little by him, and had him so much in derision when they perceived that he would be a Pilgrim. For they say, that now he is so in the Affections of his Prince, and that his *Sovereign* is so much concerned with the *Indignities* that was cast upon *Christian* when he became a Pilgrim, that he will look upon all as if done unto himself; and no marvel, for 'twas for the love that he had to his Prince, that he ventured as he did. (176)

Sagacity's report moves the narrator to ask about Christian's wife and children, whom part one had included among those who cast "*Indignities*" on Christian as he contemplated pilgrimage, and who had also cried out after him to return as he set off. Sagacity explains of Christiana and her sons that "though they all plaid the Fool at first, and would by no means be persuaded by either the tears or intreaties of Christian, yet second thoughts have wrought wonderfully with them, so they have packt up and are gone after him" (176-77).

How far do these "second thoughts" extend? Sagacity goes on to provide an account of Christiana's "thoughts" after her husband left on pilgrimage. Later on in part two, in the House of the Interpreter, we will see Christiana once more musing thoughtfully, this time on a peculiar riddling image of a spider, an image whose significance her companions fail to discern. We learn here that Christiana "was a Woman quick of apprehension" (200). What we hear now from Sagacity is that she is likewise thoughtful about her own past:

. . . her thoughts began to work in her mind; First, for that she had lost her Husband, and for that the loving bond of that Relation was utterly broken

betwixt them. For you know, said he to me, nature can do no less but entertain the living with many a heavy Cogitation in the remembrance of the loss of loving Relations. This therefore of her husband did cost her many a Tear. But this was not all, for *Christiana* did also begin to consider with her self, whether her unbecoming behavior towards her Husband, was not one cause that she saw him no more, and that in such sort he was taken away from her. And upon this, came into her mind by *swarms*, all her unkind, unnatural, and ungodly Carriages to her dear Friend: Which also clogged her Conscience, and did load her with guilt. . . . yea, there was not any thing that *Christian* either said to her, or did before her, all the while that his burden did hang on his back, but it returned upon her like a flash of lightning, and rent the Caul of her Heart in sunder. Specially that bitter out-cry of his, *What shall I do to be saved*, did ring in her ears most dolefully. (177-78)

In Sagacity's account, Christian's burden has become Christiana's "clogged . . . Conscience," and the shift bespeaks a subtle but decisive change in Bunyan's representation of sin. In part one, Christian's burden is not glossed in specifically ethical terms: we meet the man in rags with his book and burden all at once. Here, Christiana's "clogged . . . Conscience" is the inciting incident in prompting her own pilgrimage, and her conscience is "clogged" with second thoughts about "unbecoming behavior" that she supposes might have played a part in her separation from her husband. In remembering her "Carriages to her dear Friend," she recalls the language of intimacy Christian himself had used in his entreaties to his wife and children: "*O my dear wife . . . and you the Children of my bowels, I your dear friend am in my self undone, by reason of a burden that lieth hard upon me*" (*PPI*, 8). Of course, Bunyan does not represent Christian himself entertaining "second thoughts" about his own treatment of his wife and children in leaving them. The scene of this departure in part one is highly compressed, especially in its representation of the thoughts and feelings of Christian's family. But in part two we do find in Christiana a distinctive account of pilgrimage from Christian's, begun in explicitly ethical self-reflection. As a premise of "pilgrimage," the plot of a Christian

life, this account does not simply reject Christiana's "natural" grief at the loss of her husband, "the loving bond of that Relation . . . utterly broken betwixt them." Christiana's pilgrimage instead takes up this grief as prompting a heightened sense of responsibility for her own actions, and so a new kind of self-awareness. She cannot simply follow in her husband's footsteps; she must undertake her own pilgrimage.

As we soon learn, however, even as this pilgrimage will develop a new sense of independence for Christiana, it will be defined in expressly relational terms. After receiving a letter of summons from the king of the Celestial City, Christiana resolves to leave for her journey, but before she sets off she receives a visit from two neighbors. Discovering that Christiana is preparing for a journey "*to go after my good Husband,*" Mrs. Timorous, the elder neighbor, replies, "I hope not so, good Neighbour, pray for your poor Childrens sake, do not so unwomanly cast away your self" (181). We recall here Shame's mockery to Faithful in part one, that "a tender conscience was an unmanly thing." In part two Bunyan responds to this charge, I have suggested, with an acute irony, turning it into a full-blown narrative of female companionship that embodies the social life of "tender conscience." But here the narrative presses further, challenging Mrs. Timorous's account of what counts as "womanly" behavior as well. Christiana tells Mrs. Timorous that she has been troubled by her own "churlish Carriages" to her husband "when he was under his distress," and that, moreover, she now shares in what had been his zeal for the journey (182). She has had a dream of her husband as he "dwelleth in the presence of the King of the Country," where "he sits and eats with him at his Table," and she herself has received a letter of invitation from the king. Mrs. Timorous dismisses Christiana's reasoning and story as "madness." Having heard reports of Christian's

journey herself, Mrs. Timorous reminds Christiana of the dangers he faced, and the “wise men,” his neighbors Pliable and Obstinate, who turned back when he did not. And “if he, tho’ a man,” Mrs. Timorous asks, “was so hard put to it, what canst thou being but a poor Woman do?” For the sake of your children, she insists, “keep thou at home” (183). While Christiana rebukes Mrs. Timorous (“tempt me not, my Neighbour”) and Mrs. Timorous reviles her in turn and wants to “leave her in her own hands,” Christiana’s other neighbor, Mercy, is “at a stand, and could not so readily comply” with her elder’s incredulous disapproval of Christiana. Christiana, after all, had been “cry[ing] out for Mercy waking and sleeping” when contemplating her actions around her husband’s departure (178). “Mercy” arrives in short order, in the form of a neighbor.

As a neighbor initially willing to join Christiana on pilgrimage, Mercy recalls Christian’s neighbor and sometime companion in part one, Pliable. She does so, however, signalling an important shift in Bunyan’s valuation of neighborly virtue. In part one, after hearing Christian’s report of the glories of the place he ventured toward, as witnessed to in his book, Pliable leaves his neighbor Obstinate behind and decides to go with Christian. Given Pliable’s name and the dubious warrant he supplies for leaving in the first place—“the things [Christian] looks after are better than ours; my heart inclines to go with my Neighbour”—we are not especially surprised when he turns back in disappointment at the first sign of difficulty (*PPI*, 12). Watching Christian sink in the *Slough of Despond*, Pliable jeers in disappointment, “Is this the happiness you have told me all this while of?” (*PPI*, 14)? Mercy is similarly willing to part with her elder neighbor Mrs. Timorous to join Christiana, but by contrast, her reasoning from the outset is more complex:



First, her Bowels yearned over *Christiana*: so she said with in her self, If my Neighbour will needs be gon, I will go a little way with her, and help her. Secondly, her Bowels yearned over her own Soul, (for what *Christiana* had said, had taken some hold upon her mind). Wherefore she said within her self again, I will yet have more talk with this *Christiana*, and if I find Truth and Life in what she shall say, my self with my Heart shall also go with her. (183)

In part one, while Christian will have godly companions like Faithful and Hopeful, Bunyan can only envisage those specifically named as neighbors as temptations to spiritual inertia or as superficial fellow travelers on the way. Mercy's vow to "help" her neighbor in part two represents a new departure.

In an essay that explores the equivocal moral and political valence of neighbors in Bunyan's writing, in light of what he suggests is Bunyan's critical relationship to the spatial logic of nation-building, Adam Sills has rightly argued that in part two Mercy offers a "corrective" to Pliable's behavior in part one.<sup>42</sup> Sills mistakes, however, the character of this corrective. Sills argues that the "crucial distinction in this repetition with a difference" is that Mercy's deliberation includes rational considerations and not simply, as for Pliable, "sympathy and fellow-feeling" (80). Mercy's "'yearning' for Christiana is only a precursor to the yearning over her own soul, which must be approached with a careful balance of reason and emotion." Mercy, on Sills's reading, emerges as a pilgrim precisely because she can "transcend" the "label" of neighbor. Yet this reading fails, first, because Pliable's actions are themselves nowhere ascribed to "sympathy and fellow-feeling." His initial impulse had been to "fetch [Christian] back by force," but on hearing Christian talk he simply thinks he tells a good story about a lovely place and his desire is pricked to join him. This may well still amount, as Sills

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<sup>42</sup> Adam Sills, "Mr. Bunyan's Neighborhood and the Geography of Dissent," *English Literary History* 70 (2003): 67-87.

suggests, to a “skepticism” in part one about “surfaces,” including those of neighborly proximity and acquaintance. But it is precisely this skepticism that is revisited “with a difference” in part two. Second, then, and more importantly, Sills’s account of Mercy obscures the changing valuation of neighborliness in part two. The “corrective” to the account of Pliable here is not that Mercy reasons about her salvation and so is not simply gulled by “fellow-feeling” for a neighbor. Rather, Mercy’s fellow-feeling, like Christiana’s love for her husband, is taken up as a constitutive moment in the account of pilgrimage itself, not as a potential threat or detour. As Christiana assures Mercy when Mercy expresses grief for the neighbors they leave behind, “Bowels becometh Pilgrims” (186).<sup>43</sup>

In this new departure over neighborliness in part two, Bunyan reconceives the nature of the Christian life, to include other means of grace than those displayed in the life of Christian. Even Christiana’s story is not now singularly determinative of what counts as pilgrimage in part two. For while Christiana has received a direct “invitation” from the king of the Celestial City, delivered by a visitor called Secret, and while she has experienced dreams and visions about her husband’s celestial home and her own destiny to be there with him, Mercy has only Christiana’s invitation and her own desire to go on. Expressing worry along these lines, Mercy utters the familiar Puritan problem of assurance: “*But how,*” she asks her new companion, “*shall I be ascertained that I also shall be entertained*” (186)? She adds here an openness, however, to human mediation that is so often notoriously missing in many accounts of this problem, including other of

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<sup>43</sup> This new departure in part two seems to signal Bunyan’s recognition of the facts of contemporary practices of neighborly cooperation among women of the poor and “middling sorts,” and the form of collective agency such practices could provide. On the varieties of neighbor relations among such women in early modern England, see Capp, *When Gossips Meet*.

Bunyan's own: "*Had I but this hope from one that can tell, I would make no stick at all, but would go, being helped by him that can help, tho' the way was never so tedious.*"

Christiana, reassuring her neighbor to press on to the Wicket Gate, is here counted as "one that can tell," a trustworthy guide.

Here Bunyan seems to revisit aspects of his own conversion as related in *Grace Abounding*. In a famous scene in that text, Bunyan recalls being stopped short one day as he goes about his work as a tinker in Bedford. By "the good providence of God" on this particular day, Bunyan writes, in one street he discovers "three or four poor women sitting at a door in the Sun, and talking about the things of God" (§37, p. 16). The prospect of a lively religious exchange lures young man Bunyan in. As he recalls, "I drew near to hear what they said; for I was now a brisk talker also my self in the matters of Religion." What Bunyan finds in these women is not, however, a warm confirmation of his own piety or an occasion to display his newly acquired religious fluency. Instead, his experience is one of self-conscious distance and exclusion; of intrigue, but also incomprehension. "*I heard,*" he reports, "*but I understood not,*"

for they were far above out of my reach . . . me thought they spake as if joy did make them speak: they spake with such pleasantness of Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world, as if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned among their Neighbours" (§§37-38, pp. 16-17).

To striking effect, Bunyan joins three passages of scripture to figure the significance of what he glimpses in this unassuming company of poor women. The recollection that "three or four" made up the group appears to be less Bunyan's fumbling through hazy memory than a way of figuring these women as a gathered Christian church, the body of Christ, as in Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name,

there am I in the midst of them.” Bunyan further locates this gathered body in the history of Israel, quoting from Balaam’s poetic blessing of Israel as God’s chosen people among the nations in Numbers 23: “For from the top of the rocks I see [Jacob], and from the hills I behold him: lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations” (v. 9).<sup>44</sup> Bunyan reports that the women “discoursed of their own wretchedness of heart, of their unbelief, and did contemn, slight, and abhor their own righteousness” (¶37, p. 16). But like Balaam, Bunyan himself can speak nothing but praise and blessing regarding them: as Balaam exclaims, “How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom the Lord hath not defied?” (Numbers 23:8). Finally, Bunyan quotes from the concluding chapter of Daniel, where the renowned seer and prophet

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<sup>44</sup> In rendering “nations” as “Neighbors” in his quotation from Numbers 23, Bunyan notably departs from contemporary biblical translations available to him (he quotes from Geneva and the Authorized Version throughout his career, and once from Tyndale’s translation [see C. Hill, *Tinker and a Poor Man*, 169]). In doing so he provides a fascinating but somewhat equivocal illustration of a broader trend in the history of vernacular English Bible translation recently identified by Naomi Tadmor, which gave increasing privilege to the word “neighbour” in a number of key biblical contexts. See Naomi Tadmor, “Friends and Neighbours in Early Modern England: Biblical Translations and Social Norms,” in Miri Rubin, Laura Gowing, and Michael Hunter, eds., *Love, Friendship, and Faith in Europe, 1300-1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 150-76. As Tadmor shows, precedent had been laid for this trend in the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate, where translators newly inflected a Hebrew word that had meant “friend” or “fellow man” with connotations of local proximity and co-residence. The Wycliffite Bible further built on this trend but retained “freend” at key junctures, for example in Leviticus 19:18: “loue thi freend as thi silf.” By Tyndale’s translation the Wycliffite “freend” had at last become a “neighbour.” The changes were consolidated and added to in the Authorized Version. For Tadmor, this trend in vernacular English Bible translation points toward “a Protestant ethos of communalism in the making” (152). Resisting some prominent accounts of the “decline of neighbourliness” and the rise of individualism in the historiography of medieval and early modern social life, Tadmor concludes that “the language of neighbourly love in the early modern period was neither a waning relic of the pre-Reformation era, nor necessarily a declining ethos” (167). The “idiom of neighbourliness,” rather, was “clearly a vibrant one,” if also “complex and self-contradictory.” Since Bunyan’s image here is one of separation, his transposition of “Neighbours” for “nations” seems *both* to make local and familiar a typological context *and* to introduce rupture into that context. Bunyan elsewhere renders this passage from Numbers 23 with “nations”: see *A Confession of my Faith; and a Reason of my Practice* (1672), in *Miscellaneous Works*, vol. 4, 156. For another reading of the passage in *Grace Abounding*, see Sills, “Mr. Bunyan’s Neighborhood,” 75-77.

glimpses history's end amidst a "time of trouble" (12:1). What he quotes explicitly is Daniel's own incomprehension before a cryptic vision of the duration of "these wonders" (12:6). Two figures on opposite sides of a river discuss the question, "How long?" The answer comes: "it shall be for a time, times, and a half; and when he shall have accomplished to scatter the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished" (12:7). Here Daniel, characteristically so adept in interpretation, is confounded: "And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things" (12:8)?

Bunyan's turn to Daniel's vision especially suggests that in these Bedford women he has glimpsed an eschatological fellowship, one clearly embodied in time but whose very faithful historical embodiment seems to signal an endurance beyond time. The women would linger in Bunyan's memory, quietly but persistently stoking his imagination and affections, as well as his theological reflection. *Grace Abounding* is itself likely a development of oral testimony Bunyan would soon give to the Independent church in Bedford when he was received into their membership around 1653.<sup>45</sup> Of the Bedford women he writes: "their talk and discourse went with me, also my heart would tarry with them, for I was greatly affected by their words, both because by them I was convinced that I wanted the true tokens of a truly godly man, and also because by them I was convinced of the happy and blessed condition of him that was such a one" (§40, p. 17).

*Grace Abounding* is frequently read as a testament to the harrowing, on some accounts near-manic, sense of isolation and psychological anguish Bunyan seems to have

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<sup>45</sup> W. R. Owens, Introduction, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (New York: Penguin, 1987), xii.

experienced surrounding his conversion and on into his early career as a Nonconformist pastor and evangelist. If his vision of the joyous fellowship among the Bedford women would linger with him, so too would his felt exclusion from the “new world” they seemed to inhabit. Bunyan had seen a “peculiar” people in the poor Bedford women, chosen by God if not by the world. But could he too be among their number? In her recent book, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*, Jennifer Herdt has situated Bunyan’s worries about election in an early modern “exodus from virtue” in Christian ethics, an exodus premised on a range of “hyper-Augustinian” anxieties about hypocrisy and the mere semblance of virtue. On Herdt’s reading, Bunyan engages in a kind of “performative contradiction” in *Grace Abounding*. Vigorously asserting his writerly agency to fix in pseudo-scriptural objectivity an otherwise tenuous assurance of election, Bunyan simultaneously construes his own efforts as “a ceding of agency, which denounces as hypocritical and hubristic any aspiration to transform the self” (207). Likewise does Bunyan distrust exemplarity, models of a life of virtue that one might emulate, so that even as *Grace Abounding* offers its readers a sort of “social formation,” it can only be “for a life of intense introspection and isolation” (213). So for Herdt, in hearing the “honest confession of sin” among the Bedford women, Bunyan cannot see “models of virtue” or indeed the Body of Christ that would welcome him in. What he sees rather are “honest sinners who rely wholly on the love of Christ,” a picture of pure passivity and not virtuous activity (212). “He perceives the Bedford Christians,” moreover, “as living in a new world, from which he is cut off . . . . Bunyan’s sense of isolation is exacerbated by his fear of self-deception; aware of how appearances deceive, he cannot trust others, even honest Christians, truly to perceive the state of his soul.” The

women's honest confession of sin, then, simply makes Bunyan aware of the hypocrisy of his own external virtue, an awareness Herdt reads as morally paralyzing and self-defeating.

In part because she confines her attention to the text of *Grace Abounding*, Herdt's reading does not register how this scene "tarries" with Bunyan well beyond its pages, opening out in a variety of forms across his work. Yet even within *Grace Abounding* itself, it does not appear to be the case, in fact, that Bunyan cannot see the poor Bedford women as a moral community, a community of virtue. Indeed, he describes their effect on him in moral terms, terms that open out to an experience of trust in these women as his *teachers*:

Therefore I should often make it my business to be going again and again into the company of these poor people; for I could not stay away; and the more I went amongst them, the more I did question my condition; and as still I do remember, presently I found two things within me, at which I did sometimes marvel . . . the one was, a very great softness and tenderness of heart, which caused me to fall under the conviction of what by Scripture they asserted; and the other was, a great bending in my mind to a continual meditating on them, and on all other good things which at any time I heard or read of. (§41, p. 17)

To be sure, Bunyan's struggles here both to perceive and to discover himself within Christian community emerge apart from a sacramental context, a place where epistemological worries seem to become insistent if not simply vexing.<sup>46</sup> Yet Herdt's assertion in light of this scene that Bunyan "cannot trust others" moves too quickly.

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<sup>46</sup> For a lucid account of such problems and their context amidst a "transformation of the languages of penance and repentance" in the English reformations, see Sarah Beckwith, "William Shakespeare and Stanley Cavell: Acknowledging, Confessing, and Tragedy," in Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, eds., *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 123-35; and more fully, Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011): on self-scrutiny and assurance in particular, see, e.g., 45.

Clearly he trusts these people enough to tell him something about his own “condition,” to prompt self-reflection in light of their visible form of community and their own practices of self-reflection. Bunyan points explicitly, moreover, to the “very great softness and tenderness of heart, which caused me to fall under the conviction of what by Scripture they asserted,” an affect of receptivity and trust before acknowledged teachers. This is at least as much a picture of trust prompting self-reflection—even, for the developing allegorist, a kind of harrowing self-satire—as it is a picture of felt exclusion. Yet Bunyan “tarried” still further with this memory. The form of newfound trust before a visible community on display here is precisely what he develops in Mercy’s relationship to Christiana, who is counted as “one that can tell.” While Christiana cannot speak with the authority of Langland’s Holy Church—and indeed, while Bunyan does not offer a theology of church deeply shaped by a richly elaborated account of Christ’s incarnation, as Langland does—she can provide Mercy voice and assurance enough to go on. Christiana is after all part of that company of whom it is later said, on the Enchanted Ground, “they were forced for some time, to feel for one another, by Words; for they walked not by Sight” (296). “Nor shalt thou be rejected,” Christiana declares to her new companion, “tho thou goest but upon *my Invitation*” (185). This is likewise voice and assurance enough for fellowship that extends to a sharing of material possessions: “we will have all things in common betwixt us,” Christiana insists, “only go along with me.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In accounting for Bunyan’s relations to the Bedford church, we should also not mistake Bunyan’s introspection for a simple displacement of practice in this community. The Bedford church book exhibits a range of concrete practices in the church, and Bunyan’s prominent role in such practices: e.g., collective prayer (for the sick, for guidance of the church and the nation), fasting, congregational discernment of individual gifts and collective resources, personal testimony, restitution, collections for the poor, confession and reconciliation, visiting prisoners, preaching and listening to sermons, singing psalms, taking the Lord’s Supper, withdrawal of communion from those in stubborn sin, seeking counsel and reporting news from other pastors



Though together a powerful figuration of the church at this point in the narrative, Christiana and Mercy, along with Christiana's children, will not travel their way alone. The ecclesial cast of characters in part two includes an authoritative guide in Great-heart and a defender in Valiant-for-truth, both male figures. So while Mercy and Christiana's companionship represents, as I have suggested, Bunyan's tarrying with a formative scene in *Grace Abounding* and in his own conversion, it would seem that he did not wish to depict Christian female community apart from male pastoral leadership. Bunyan also dealt directly with the question of separate female gathering in his pastoral polemic, *A Case of Conscience Resolved* (1683), arguing against it. Yet we can also move too quickly here in ironing out what are clearly tensions and multiple trajectories in Bunyan's writing. In a prefatory letter to this very polemic, for example, in which Bunyan "makes a question" about the lawfulness of separate female gatherings, apart from communion with the full congregation, he writes:

Honoured Sisters, 'Tis far from me to despise you, or to do any thing to your reproach. I know that you are beloved of God for the sake of Christ, and that you stand fixed for ever by Faith upon the same foundation with us. I also know that the Lord doth put no difference betwixt Male and Female, as to the communications of his Saving Graces, but hath often made many of your Sex eminent for piety, yea, there hath been of YOU, I speak now of ordinary Christians, that for Holiness of life have out gone many of the Brethren: Nor can their vertuous lives but be renown and Glory to YOU, and conviction to those of US who have come behinde you in Faith and Holyness. The love of Women in Spirituals (as well as Naturals) oft times out-goes that of Men. (295)<sup>48</sup>

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and congregations, mutual service, and composing and consenting to confessions of faith. See H. G. Tibbutt, ed., *The Minutes of the First Independent Church (Now Bunyan Meeting) at Bedford, 1656-1766* (Bedfordshire: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1976).

<sup>48</sup> I quote here from the text collected in *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 4, ed. T. L. Underwood, 291-330.

Bunyan goes on to acknowledge the attentions of the woman who annointed Jesus' feet while men neglect him (Luke 7:36-50), and the various female companions of Jesus during his earthly ministry (Luke 8:1-3). He praises the "Christian valour," "fortitude of mind," and "eminencie in vertue" of women Christian martyrs. "So there is no superiority," Bunyan writes, citing Galatians 3:28, "as I know of, but we are all one in Christ" (322). Lest we think these merely rhetorical concessions, we can see Bunyan grappling with scripture that seems to press against his position. Bunyan thus explicitly recognizes those "*Extraordinary* ones" in scripture, "such as *Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Anna*, or the rest, as the Daughters of *Philip* the Evangelist, *Priscilla*, the Women that *Paul* said laboured with him in the Gospel, or such like" (326). These women, Bunyan affirms, "might Teach, Prophecy, and had power to call the People together so to do." Bunyan immediately scuttles, however, a direct conclusion from such "*Extraordinary*" witnesses in scripture that would endorse ordinary female teaching authority when it came to "Acts of Power," as he finds these female authorities always to defer to male prophets when they are present. Yet even so, he concedes, "If any of these high Women" had endorsed separate women gatherings, "I should have Subscribed thereto" (327).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For treatments of Bunyan's views of women and their representation in his writing, see, e.g., Margaret Olofson Thickstun, *Fictions of the Feminine: Puritan Doctrine and the Representation of Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); N. H. Keeble, "'Here is her Glory, even to be under Him': The Feminine in the Thought and Work of John Bunyan," in Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens, and Stuart Sims, eds., *John Bunyan and His England, 1628-88* (London: Hambledon, 1990), 131-47; Tasmin Spargo, *The Writing of John Bunyan* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997); Margaret J. M. Ezell, "Bunyan's Women, Women's Bunyan," in Camden, ed., *Trauma and Transformation*, 63-80; Thomas H. Luxon, "One Soul Versus One Flesh: Friendship, Marriage, and the Puritan Self," in Camden, *Ibid.*, 81-99; and Camden, "John Bunyan and the Goodwives of Bedford: A Psychoanalytic Approach," in Anne Dunan-Page, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 51-64. For contexts and examples Bunyan would have been familiar with, see too Curtis Freeman, ed., *A Company of Women Preachers: Baptist Prophetesses in Seventeenth-Century England* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2011). [Comment on Luxon here.]

If Bunyan could at least acknowledge a scriptural female heroism in *A Case of Conscience Resolved*, in part two of *The Pilgrim's Progress* he has an apostolic figure called Gaius speak once more “on behalf of women,” emphasizing especially now female acts of generosity and companionship, ones that resonate with Mercy’s offer to “help” her neighbor Christiana.

I will say again, that when the Saviour was come, Women rejoyced in him, before either Man or Angel. I read not that ever any man did give unto Christ so much as one *Groat*, but the Women followed him, and ministered to him of their Substance. 'Twas a Woman that washed his Feet with Tears, and a Woman that anointed his Body to the Burial. They were Women that wept when he was going to the Cross; and Women that followed him from the Cross, and that sat by his Sepulcher when he was buried. They were Women that was first with him at his Resurrection *morn*, and Women that brought Tidings first to his Disciples that he was risen from the Dead. (261)

Gaius goes on to conclude that all this affirms that “Women . . . are highly favoured, and shew by these things that they are sharers with us in the Grace of Life.” Yet Gaius’s formulation of a male “us,” apparently confident in the justice of its own relations to Christ, for inclusion in which female Christians must have their case defended, belies the Christology part two has been quietly but persistently developing. Mercy emerges here as the central figure of part two, as both a recipient of grace Christologically defined and as an embodiment of that grace for others. As Christiana assures Mercy, “The King, who hath sent for me and my Children, is one that delighteth in *Mercie*” (185). In her generosity and her independence of mind, Mercy is likewise an allegorically representative figure of the mutualities that Bunyan suggests must constitute the life of the dissenting church.

We see these qualities most expressly in Mercy's rebuff to a figure named Mr. Brisk while the pilgrims are staying in the House Beautiful, one of the narrative's figures for the church. We now learn of Mercy's characteristic work:

Her mind also was, to be always busying of her self in doing, for when she had nothing to do for her self, she would be making of Hose and Garments for others, and would bestow them upon them that had need. (227)

Great-heart has already prepared us to make links between this kind of labor and Christ's own, in the "pardon" he says Christ offers to sinners on account of the "Union" in his person of both "*Godhead*" and "*Manhood*" (210). Christ possesses a righteousness that has the character of both gift and necessity, and that issues in self-giving labor:

Here then is a Righteousness that Christ, as God, as Man, as God-man has no need of, with Reference to himself, and therefore he can spare it, a justifying Righteousness, that he for himself wanteth not, and therefore he giveth it away. Hence 'tis called the *gift of Righteousness*. This Righteousness, since Christ Jesus the Lord, has made himself under the Law, *must* be given away: For the Law doth not only bind him that is under it, *to do justly*; but to use Charity: Wherefore he *must*, he *ought* by the Law, if he hath two Coats, to give one to him that has none. Now our Lord hath indeed *two Coats*, one for himself, and one to spare: Wherefore he freely bestows one upon those that have none. And thus *Christiana*, and *Mercie*, and the rest of you that are here, doth your Pardon come by *deed*, or by the work of another man. Your Lord Christ is he that has worked, and given away what he wrought for the next poor Beggar he meets. (211)

This is perhaps Bunyan's most mature, if also compact, treatment of Christology. We can recall here Fowler's charges of antinomianism against Bunyan, as well as what I have seen by contrast as Bunyan's critical realism. Fowler's charge will not stick. In Great-heart's teaching, Christ puts himself "under the law" of justice and charity. This is no inscrutable god of sheer voluntarist power. Indeed Christ "*ought*" to give what he has, even as this gift remains gift and not debt. Fowler had defined his project as articulating the "eternal Reason, why that which is good should be so and required, and why that

which is evil should be so and forbidden; which depends not so much on the divine will as the divine nature.” Here Great-heart defines divine nature Christologically, and the shape of “reason” would have to follow accordingly, with the grain of the universe.<sup>50</sup> Like Christ in Great-heart’s theology, Mercy is “always busying of her self in doing,” giving away her second coat to “the next poor beggar she meets”: “she would be making of Hose and Garments for others, and would bestow them upon them that had need.”

What Mr. Brisk sees in Mercy, by contrast, is “a good Huswife” and a fine Protestant work ethic (226). He is described as “man of some breeding . . . that pretended to Religion; but a man that stuck very close to the World” (226). As he asks Mercy on one of his visits: “What always at it? . . . And what canst thee *earn* a day” (227)? Mercy, we are told, tells the maidens of the house—i.e., Humble-mind, Prudence, Piety, and Charity—about Mr. Brisk and his visits, and “enquired of them concerning him” (227). They tell her “that he was a very busie Young-Man, and one that pretended to Religion; but was as they feared, a stranger to the Power of that which was good.” Prudence advises Mercy specifically, “That there needed no great matter of discouragement to be given to him, her continuing so as she had began to do for the Poor, would quickly cool his Courage.” Mercy takes Prudence’s advice, replying to Mr. Brisk when he asks about her earning power, “I do these things . . . *That I may be Rich in good Works, laying up in store a good Foundation against the time to come, that I may lay hold on Eternal Life.*” Mr. Brisk asks what this might mean, and what she does with the clothes she makes. Mercy claims to do what the medieval church called a corporal work of mercy: “Cloath

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<sup>50</sup> Here I allude to the treatment of natural theology in Stanley Hauerwas’s Gifford Lectures, published as *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001).

the naked.” “With that,” we are told, “his Countenance fell.” Mr. Brisk “forbore to come again,” explaining, “*That Mercie was a pretty lass; but troubled with ill Conditions.*”

That Mercy’s encounter with Mr. Brisk has wider significance in Bunyan’s narrative is signalled by a gloss Prudence makes on Mr. Brisk’s sudden lack of interest. Mercy explains, “*I might a had Husbands afore now . . . but they were such as did not like my Conditions*” (227-28). Prudence replies: “*Mercie* in our days is little set by, any further then as to its Name: the Practice, which is set forth by thy Conditions, there are but few that can abide.” As we have seen, Mercy’s “Practice” is of deep theological significance in Bunyan’s allegory, disclosive of one who “has worked, and given away what he wrought for the next poor Beggar he meets.” We are likewise told by Gaius, in answer to a riddle from Old Honest: “*He that bestows his Goods upon the Poor, / Shall have as much again, and ten times more*” (263). From atop Mt. Charity, in the Delectable Mountains, the pilgrim company again meets this teaching, in the figure of “a man that had a bundle of Cloth lying before him, out of which he cut Coats and Garments, for the Poor that stood about him; yet his Bundle or Role of Cloth was never the less” (286). Such “Practice” and the theological economy of abundance it witnesses to, Mercy embodies more than anyone in Bunyan’s allegory. Hers is a practice apparently not subject to premarital negotiations, only counsel from Prudence in the company of Mercy’s fellow pilgrims. Badman’s wife, in the face of his attempts to isolate her from Christian community, resists him in terms resonant with Mercy’s before Mr. Brisk: “put[ting] on more courage than she was wont,” Mrs. Badman declares, “I have an Husband, but also a God . . . I have an Husband, but also a Soul . . . You are commanded to love me, as you love your own body, and so do I love you; but I tell you

true, I preferr my Soul before all the world, and its Salvation will I seek” (*BM* 78-79).

With a likeminded resolve, Mercy declares to Prudence, after Mr. Brisk has gone his way: “*I cannot change my Nature, and to have one that lies cross to me in this, that I purpose never to admit of, as long as I live*” (228).

### **Mercy’s Conscience and the Imaginative Life of Dissent**

Mercy’s resolve before Mr. Brisk figures a dissenting church that will not consent to communion with those “stuck very close to the World.” Mercy’s counselor Prudence accordingly shows savvy about Mr. Brisk as a “pretender to Religion.” With a Weberian eye for theologically energetic and disciplined labor, Mr. Brisk sees in Mercy domestic value and earning power, and so cannot but misperceive her evangelical calling to “Cloath the naked.” Unlike some of the militantly figured triumphs we see from Christian, Great-heart, and Valiant-for-truth, here Prudence calls expressly for nonviolent resistance, simply telling Mercy to go on doing what is in “her nature” to do. Part two has defined this “nature” theologically, as Mercy’s virtue has been displayed first in a neighborly act of acknowledgment, trust, and “help,” and at last in work closely aligned with Christ’s own. Recalling and developing Wiseman’s call, in *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, to “help” our neighbor and not turn advantages of knowledge and skill into weapons against her, Mercy discloses a theological economy of gift in which labor for the poor is not lost and “the least of these” welcomed first in fellowship. We see as much when the pilgrims arrive in the Delectable Mountains, where Mercy and Christiana are counted with Great-heart among the “strong,” and they enter the shepherds’ palace last, behind the weak, Old Honest, Ready-to-halt, Feeble-mind, Dispondencie, and Much-

afraid. “So the Feeble and Weak went in, and Mr. *Great-heart*, and the rest did follow” (285). Here was a fellowship in which what the Fowlerian writer of *Dirt Wip’t Off* called “nothings” could discover and exercise their own capacities for judgment. There is a peculiar “myht” in mercy, as Langland’s Holy Church had taught; and God’s own “myht” is displayed most fully in the mercy of Christ:

Here myhtow se ensaumples in hymself one  
That he was myhtfull and meke, and mercy gan graunte  
To hem that hengen hym hye and his herte thorlede [pierced]. (I.168-70)

As Aquinas writes of mercy, similarly, “of all the virtues which relate to our neighbor, mercy is the greatest.” Indeed, it is “proper to God” himself, and signals a definition of power wholly alien to voluntarist visions of sheer overwhelming force. For mercy pertains, Aquinas says, to “one who stands above” and gives to those who lack: “therein [God’s] omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested” (*ST* II-II.30.4).

The pictures of pilgrim fellowship such as I have been pursuing in Bunyan’s writing should give us a sharper vocabulary for describing post-Reformation change and continuity in accounts of moral and political agency—terms sharper, for example, than those of Max Weber, who wrote in sociologically schematic terms: “In what was for the man of the age of the Reformation the most important thing in life, his eternal salvation, he was forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from eternity. No one could help him.”<sup>51</sup> We have seen that “help” is precisely a question Bunyan thematizes and reflects on at length, in different terms in *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* and part two of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. But in their conscientious resolve, were Bunyan’s pilgrims not following a lonely path after all? In his *A*

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<sup>51</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1958] (New York: Dover, 2003), 104.



*Confession of my Faith; and a Reason of my Practice* (1672), Bunyan in his own voice displays a conscientious resolve similar to the one he gives Mercy and Mrs. Badman, here explicitly invoking the language of “consent”:

Indeed my principles are such, as lead me to a denial to communicate in the things of the Kingdom of Christ, with ungodly and open prophane; neither can I in, or by the superstitious inventions of this world, consent that my Soul should be governed, in any of my approaches to God, because commanded to the contrary, and commended for so refusing. . . . unless I make of my conscience a continual butchery, and slaughter-shop, unless putting out my own eyes I commit me to the blind to lead me (as I doubt is desired by some) I have determined the Almighty God being my help, and shield, yet to suffer, if frail life might continue so long, even till the moss shall grow on mine eye-browes rather then thus to violate my faith and principles. (*MW*, vol. 4, p. 136)

What a reading of some of the works I have explored here can help illuminate in such articulations of conscience and its withholding of consent under state-sponsored strictures of worship, is that, for Bunyan, the convictions of conscience could not be formed, discovered, or legitimated by introspection alone. The vision of moral community in the “three or four” poor women at Bedford, which I have suggested Bunyan “tarries” with throughout his career, does not offer the kind of discursive stability Hobbes imagined for *conscientia* in what he regarded as its literal sense, where “two, or more men, know of one and the same fact.” But it was in such community, for Bunyan, that moral knowledge became articulate. In his discussion of Stanley Cavell’s criticisms of John Rawls’s account of the social contract, Peter Dula has written: “The range of my consent must be discovered, not assumed to be taken care of by the mythical mechanism of contract. Recognizing my complicity, the scope of my consent, is the first step of a viable dissent.”<sup>52</sup> Some of Bunyan’s more heroic pictures of dissent perhaps obscure the

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 72.

mutualities he thought not only made dissent possible, but, since its life was constituted by the kind of virtues we glimpse in Mercy, made the terms of dissent intelligible in the first place.

We should recall here that it is specifically at the counsel of Prudence that Mercy takes her stand. In an impressive account of the Reformation and its relationship to modern life, with consequences intended and not, Brad Gregory has recently argued for a Reformation displacement of communal “prudence” and “counsel,” making way for the individualist “sovereignty” of conscience, according to which “one was one’s own sovereign authority, answerable only to God.”<sup>53</sup> While the individualism of teaching by magisterial reformers was obscured by their embrace in state churches, radical reformers like Milton and Roger Williams made the implications of Reformation doctrines apparent and championed them. “In principle, this undermined the importance of counsel that shaped one’s formation in moral community and the exercise of prudence within it . . . . Indeed, in principle this pointed to the end of Christian moral communities as such, except among those individual Christians who happened to agree with one another, for as long as they happened to agree.” Yet Bunyan, we have seen, could still advocate a “conscience” that needed prudence and the counsel of trusted others. Bunyan was admittedly without magisterial authority in his account of the binding power of conscience. But as we have seen in his treatment of economic ethics, “good conscience” had normative and social purchase well beyond arbitrary individual application. Likewise, it was in the name of conscience and what Hobbes rejected as its double vision that Bunyan challenged what he saw as undue accommodations to sovereign power in

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<sup>53</sup> B. Gregory, *Unintended*, 215.

Edward Fowler's ethics and ecclesiology. Civil sovereignty, Bunyan saw in his own lifetime, could be a fickle thing, and he met its accommodation in theological matters with a fierce skepticism. Yet for Bunyan, as indeed for Aquinas and Ames, while the voice of conscience was individually binding it could not be recognized apart from the voices of others. The terms of Christian community, including its sacramental and institutional contexts, had indeed changed for Bunyan dramatically from, for example, those of a writer like Langland. But in Bunyan's writing prudence and the community that gave it shape and expression had not been simply displaced or dissolved. Our terms of analysis once more need a finer grain here, in accounting for the different articulations of prudence and Christian community that gave conscience its shape and resources. Bunyan too could grapple with new powers that claimed sovereign authority, could resist coercion from state and market, and not simply in the name of a "sovereign," self-justifying conviction.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

William Revere was born in St. Augustine, Florida and grew up in central Florida. He studied English literature as an undergraduate at the University of Central Florida. He holds master's degrees in English from Southern Methodist University and in religion from Yale University. In 2013-2014 he was the recipient of an Evan Frankel fellowship for Ph.D. students in the Humanities at Duke. He is married to Donica P. Revere, who also hails from central Florida, by way of Longview, Texas and Memphis, Tennessee.